



# Nicor customers to get mercury test notice

By Elizabeth Neff  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

## Families in 3 suburbs sue gas utility, subcontractor

Some 200,000 Nicor Inc. gas customers will be notified by mail this week that their homes should be tested for mercury, which may have spilled during the removal of old gas meters, company officials said Tuesday.

As a task force assembled by Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan met with Nicor officials in Chicago Tuesday to review testing plans, 10 families representing 27 people in Lombard, Park Ridge and Mount Prospect fil-

ed suit against Nicor and its subcontractor, Pennsylvania-based Henkels & McCoy. The suit seeks damages in excess of \$50,000 for each person exposed to the spilled mercury.

Nicor plans to unveil detailed plans for testing homes at a Wednesday afternoon news conference, spokesman Lee Haines said.

Ryan offered some preliminary details, saying that Nicor will give priority to those homes where me-

ters were removed in the past five years and that it will try to begin testing Thursday. The testing could take anywhere from 90 days to six months, but the company is looking at ways to expedite this, Ryan said.

As of Monday evening, 255 homes had been tested for contamination, with 43 coming up positive, Nicor officials said. Nineteen of the 43 homes have been cleaned, and cleaning is under way in the rest.

The families bringing the lawsuit

have all tested positive for high levels of mercury, said attorney Shawn S. Kasserman of Corboy & Demetrio P.C., who represents the families.

"It's obviously a serious problem, and the scope of the problem continues to expand," Kasserman said. "A month ago, Nicor certainly wasn't willing to acknowledge the scope of the problem as it exists today. They are responsible to property owners for damage, whether that

is physical injury or property damage."

The suit alleges that Nicor negligently allowed mercury to be spilled in the homes, failed to warn homeowners of the risk of mercury exposure and failed to notify them of their exposure to the metal in a timely manner.

Nicor already had agreed to pay for testing people whose homes were found to contain mercury. Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge has handed out hundreds of the tests kits, but it does not yet have any results.

# Nicor to speed inspections

BY LUCIO GUERRERO  
SUBURBAN REPORTER

It could take six months to inspect all of the estimated 200,000 homes in the north and west suburbs that need to be checked for mercury contamination, Nicor Gas officials told Attorney General Jim Ryan Tuesday.

Do it faster, Ryan told them.

"Nicor told us it could be between 90 days and six months, and I told them that six months was too long and they needed to move this along," Ryan said.

Ryan said he wants Nicor to let homeowners know as quickly as possible whether they might have a problem from mercury contained in older gas meters in the suburbs.

"The most important thing is to notify all 200,000 homeowners of any potential risk and let them know about who might be at

## Attorney general: 6 months too long

greater risk, if exposed, so that they can take steps to address that," Ryan said.

He spoke after a two-hour meeting with Nicor officials and a task force of state workers he put together to look into potential health and environmental problems from gas meters that contain mercury.

A Nicor spokesman said the company will announce plans today to speed the inspections.

Ryan said the company also will explain how it plans to decide which homes to inspect first and how it will notify homeowners.

Potential problems came to light last week, when Nicor confirmed it was testing homes where it suspected that one of its

subcontractors, Henkels & McCoy, might have inadvertently spilled mercury when its workers replaced older, indoor gas meters with outdoor meters.

As of Monday—the most recent figures Nicor provided—company officials had inspected 255 homes, with 43 testing positive for higher than normal mercury levels.

The gas company decided to expand the testing after finding traces of mercury in a home where one of its own technicians, not Henkels & McCoy, replaced a meter.

Ryan said Nicor officials told him they plan to begin that expanded testing program Thursday.

The company said it has received more

than 2,500 calls from consumers worried about mercury contamination, which can cause a range of health problems, particularly for children and pregnant women.

Meanwhile, eight suburban families—all of them forced from their homes after mercury traces were found and put up in hotels—filed a negligence lawsuit Tuesday against Nicor and Henkels & McCoy.

The families are asking for unspecified damages from the gas company and the Pennsylvania subcontractor.

"It's a very big concern to each and every one of these people that they may not be able to move back into their homes. If they do, they want to make sure that they can do so safely," said Shawn Kasserman, the attorney for the families.

A similar lawsuit against Nicor was filed last week by Darlene Serrano of Park Ridge.

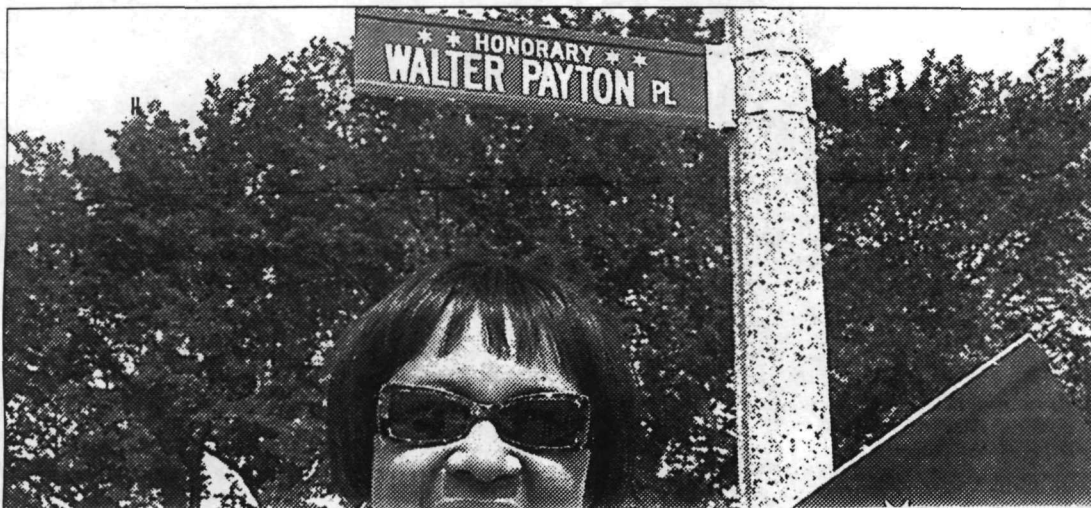
# Daley targets property taxes

*Mayor says tobacco funds, city program can lessen impact*

BY FRAN SPIELMAN  
CITY HALL REPORTER

readjustment of the tax burden in other areas with corporations paying their fair share—that is the question."

Two years ago, Daley and Houlihan devised plans for a "gentrification tax break" that would allow up to 33,000 low-income residents to defer that portion of their prop-





# Nicor to settle mercury lawsuit for \$1.85 million

Some customers may decline deal, seek more money

By Richard Wronski  
Tribune staff reporter

A judge is expected to approve a \$1.85 million class-action settlement Thursday between Nicor Gas and more than 1,000 customers in suburban Chicago whose homes were contaminated with mercury a year and a half ago.

The settlement, which would pay most of the affected residents \$400, would be a significant step in Nicor's efforts to resolve the issue.

However, at least 140 customers have filed notice that they will not participate in the settlement, leaving them the option of pursuing their own legal action against the Naperville-based utility.

"Most of my clients have decided that the amount of money offered to them would not adequately compensate them," said Sean Kasserman, a lawyer who has sued on behalf of 11 families and individ-

uals seeking at least \$50,000 each.

News of the settlement comes four months after the company settled a state and county lawsuit for \$2.25 million. Nicor said it spent \$100 million to conduct tests and clean up spilled mercury, repair damage to residences and pay living expenses to displaced families.

Since the summer of 2000, mercury has been found in about 1,059 homes in dozens of suburbs where Nicor contractors spilled the contaminant while removing old gas regulators. The mercury most often was found in basement utility areas.

Eleven lawsuits, some with multiple plaintiffs, were filed seeking hundreds of thousands of dollars for personal and property damages and accusing Nicor and its contractors of negligence.

The individual lawsuits had been on hold for months while the class action settlement was negotiated and offered to Nicor customers, who had until last week to decide if they would participate. More suits

PLEASE SEE NICOR, PAGE 4

## NICOR: Most clients in settlement to get \$400

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

are possible after the class action is resolved.

Under the settlement, most of the affected Nicor customers would get \$400, but those who were forced to leave their homes while Nicor cleaned up stand to receive several thousand dollars.

But attorneys for individual plaintiffs say the settlement figures are too low. In addition to seeking damages, the lawsuits accuse Nicor of jeopardizing the plaintiffs' health. They cite the

risks associated with mercury exposure, although state health officials have not reported any serious medical problems as a result of the contamination.

Nevertheless, Kasserman said the health issue would be pursued in court. "We'll find out more about the adverse effects [of mercury], short-term and long-term," he said.

Long-term exposure to high levels of mercury can damage the nervous system, including the brain, and possibly the kidneys.

The class-action settlement is carefully worded regarding illness or injury due to mercury contamination. Those who accept it waive claims relating to "known illness" only, but not maladies that may arise.

Cook County Circuit Judge Paul Biebel is expected to approve the settlement Thursday, according to Nicor general counsel Bruce Strobel. In October, Biebel presided over the settlement of a state and county lawsuit in which Nicor agreed to pay \$2.25 million to reimburse the state Environmental Protection Agency for expenses and to fund environmental programs in Cook, DuPage and Will Counties.

"We want to close this chapter," Strobel said. "The settlement is a gesture of good faith and respect for our customers."

DePaul University law professor Mark Weber said big companies often are eager to settle

class-action claims, even if some plaintiffs hold out.

"It's broad-based liability that companies are particularly concerned about," Weber said. "If they can get rid of the broader liability by settlement, they are willing to litigate or make separate settlements with those who are not included."

Of the 1,059 households where mercury was found, about 170 individuals or families had to leave their homes temporarily while the mercury was cleaned up. Nicor set up a \$1 million fund, the majority of the settlement, to make additional payments to this group.

Strobel said the share each household would receive is based on a formula that roughly doubled the amount Nicor spent to clean up the mercury; make repairs; replace carpeting, furniture or other items; and pay relocation expenses, such as for hotels and meals.

Of the 140 customers who filed notice opting out of the class action, 16 have already sued Nicor.

"It was pretty hard to be displaced with five kids," said P.J. McCrav, whose family had to leave its La Grange Park home for 10 days, racking up about \$3,000 in expenses. "It disrupted our lives."

Nevertheless, she said, "In a situation like this, do you always have to turn around and sue? Nicor did try to right a wrong. We were satisfied with their actions."

Chicago Tribune 2-7-02

T. 1  
2/1/02



Mick Hans

07/25/01 09:14 AM

To: RICHARD KARL/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Linda Nachowicz/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, BILL BOLEN/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, BRAD STIMPLE/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, FREDRICK MICKE/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, FRED BARTMAN/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Carol Ropski/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, WILLIAM MESSENGER/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Thomas Krueger/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, STEVEN FARYAN/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, William Munro/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Anne Rowan/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, RALPH DOLLHOPF/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Alexis Cain/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Maryann Suero/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, WILLIAM SIMES/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Denise Battaglia/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Cheryl Allen/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Elissa Speizman/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Jeff Kelley/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Phillippa Cannon/R5/USEPA/US@EPA  
cc: Nina Habib/R2/USEPA/US@EPA, JASON EL-ZEIN/R5/USEPA/US@EPA  
Subject: FYI. "Mercury: One Year Later" clip

See URL for version with photo:  
[http://www.dailyherald.com/main\\_story.asp?intid=3709710](http://www.dailyherald.com/main_story.asp?intid=3709710)

### Lessons learned a year after spills

By Mick Zawislak Daily Herald Staff Writer  
Posted on July 25, 2001

Since she was born in September, Rachel has been acting like any other infant, which is a relief to her parents considering the unsettling events that preceded her birth.

When natural gas pipes in the street along West Road in Lombard were replaced last year, the old gas meter in Jon and Karen Visick's basement was removed and replaced with a new one outside. A few months later, in early August, Karen was more than eight months pregnant when workers came to the door unannounced.

"Can we test your home?" Jon recalls them saying.

A short time later, after the test, they were told to get out right away.

"Take the clothes you're wearing and leave," they said, according to Visick.

The Lombard couple's home became one of 1,050 where mercury was spilled when old gas meters were removed or replaced.

They also were among the nearly 100 stunned suburban families moved out for as long as a month or more as crews decontaminated their homes.

What became a public health scare first was reported to authorities July 24, 2000, by a Mount Prospect man who found drops of mercury in his basement.

That discovery had a regional impact, as fear of contamination from the toxic metal led to a court-ordered inspection of about 200,000 suburban homes serviced by Nicor Gas, the Naperville-based natural gas supplier for 1.9 million customers in northern Illinois.

Suddenly, the images of contaminated sofas sitting in Dumpsters and families huddled at local hotels reminded everyone that they could be next.

It also was the beginning of a long learning curve for Nicor and several state and federal health and environmental agencies that mobilized to deal with the issue.

In a sense, the suburbs became a real-life classroom about the potentially dangerous substance. Homeowners were compelled to empty medicine chests of old thermometers and remove old containers of mercury from garages, taking 2,500 pounds of the silvery metal out of circulation.

Within the past few weeks, Gov. George Ryan signed a law requiring utilities to test before and after work is done on mercury-containing equipment.

The Visicks hadn't seen anything unusual but were told their basement had been contaminated by mercury, which escaped while the pressure-regulating device on their old gas meter was being removed by contractors working for Nicor.

By that time it seemed mercury - a silvery substance many people may remember playfully rolling on their hands when they were children - was everywhere. Individual balls of mercury can easily be contained and removed, but when tracked through a home, the vapor can cause damage to the brain, kidneys, lungs and developing fetuses.

That's what had the Visicks so worried. After a year, everyone appears to be faring well.

"The baby's been fine" and has been given a clean bill of health, Jon Visick said. So have he and his wife, he added.

Health and environmental officials said a handful of people tested slightly above the level of concern for mercury contamination but they are not aware of any illnesses linked to mercury from the regulators.

Mercury in most cases is out of the system within a few months, according to the Illinois Department of Public Health. Yet the contamination became a regional health issue that will cost Nicor an estimated \$148 million for inspections and clean-ups.

Citing a threat to public health, Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan and the state's

attorneys in Cook and DuPage counties in September sued Nicor and the subcontractors who, the suit charged, had not followed proper procedures in removing meters.

The concern over mercury spread to Chicago. As a precaution, Peoples Gas, which supplies the city, inspected 33,000 homes in Chicago. Traces of mercury were found in 49 homes.

Nicor remains under that court-ordered inspection and clean-up with a status hearing set for Thursday and the work is considered nearly complete. Of the 1,055 homes in which traces of mercury were found, all but 58 have been cleaned and declared safe by health officials. The others are in various stages of clean-up.

About 38,500 homes are considered "can't get ins" in which residents, for their own reasons, won't respond to Nicor or let inspectors inside.

"We continue to spend a lot of time on how much farther can the company, the state or the courts go. But when you're talking about 38,000 homes, we know there are some out there that would qualify and would appropriately need to be cleaned up," said Matt Dunn, chief of the environmental enforcement division for the Illinois attorney general's office.

Dunn said no one will be forced to let inspectors in and there likely will be a special consideration in the settlement when the Nicor case comes to an official end in about a month. Nicor also faces several civil lawsuits, which essentially are on hold until the state's case is resolved.

Twenty-one commercial and industrial sites, at one point including a pre-school and high school in Wheaton, Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge and Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove, four scrap yards, and 19 company service centers, also have been deemed safe.

Unknowingly, the Visicks became ensnared in a story that seemed to grow exponentially by the day, focused on homes built before 1961 with old-style regulators.

Though Nicor acknowledged some incidents, it was slow to recognize the scope of potential problems. CEO Tom Fisher did not make an official statement until five weeks after the Mount Prospect discovery and later conceded the company's early response was insufficient.

A task force was formed and state and federal health and environmental agencies mobilized. By that time images of contaminated furniture sitting on front lawns as homeowners watched workers in protective gear carry out their possessions became standard fare on the nightly news.

Many of the Visicks' possessions had to be tossed. Jon Visick estimated Nicor's cost for cleanup, food and lodging, and to replace contaminated possessions, at \$30,000 or more. That turned out to be the exception, rather than the rule, however.

Altogether, about 100 families had to leave their homes while cleaning crews did the clean-up work.



Although the percentage of homes that were contaminated was tiny compared to the total checked, those involved said the response was warranted.

The effort provided a public education, as 2,500 pounds of mercury was turned in for special disposal, Illinois EPA spokeswoman Maggie Carson said.

"The amount of mercury taken out of the homes was an important side issue that came out of this," she said.

The state public health department also stepped up its educational program in schools, said Clint Mudgett, chief of the environmental health division.

The department also will study the relation of mercury levels in homes to urine test results, which could be an indicator of health effects, he said.

The U.S. EPA said 188 Midwest utilities were alerted to check their equipment.

"It raised a level of awareness that hasn't been there before and is helping to eliminate mercury in homes and schools," said Rick Karl, emergency response chief for the EPA's Midwest office.

The publicity also seemed to boost the number of calls about mercury contamination in the six-state Midwest region, with federal clean-ups at 13 since October, he said.

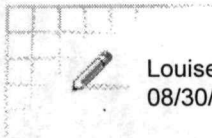
Other safeguards also are in place as a result of the mercury scare.

Nicor officials decided that only company employees, and not contractors, will work on equipment that contains mercury.

The bill signed by Ryan also requires workers or contractors to disclose any violations of safety or environmental law.

"It was frightening experience that should not be repeated," said state Sen. Dave Sullivan, who sponsored the legislation after several homes in his district in Park Ridge were affected by mercury.

Mercury: Couple had to leave for a month



Louise Fabinski  
08/30/2000 04:26 PM

To: BRAD STIMPLE  
Subject: AP wire story on mercury spill in Chicago's northern and western suburbs

fyi

----- Forwarded by Louise Fabinski/R5/USEPA/US on 08/30/2000 05:26 PM -----  
bos1@cdc.gov on 08/30/2000 03:54:08 PM



To: jur2, txf5, hjh1, cyd0, jzr8, ran2, Louise Fabinski, Lora Werner, Tom Stukas, dbg3, gaj2 cc. Jvf6, azg9, oap5, slh

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We've been working with USA Today for a couple of days as they develop a story on the topic of possible exposure to mercury associated with removal/relocation of gas regulators (attached to older meters). Regional reps Lora Werner and Tom Stukas provided some background information today to the USA Today reporter on an incident that occurred with the regulators in 1995 in Philadelphia.

Below is an AP wire story on the mercury spill issue in Chicago (forwarded courtesy of Oona Powell, NCEH).

Kathy  
B. Kathy Skipper  
Chief, Public Affairs and Marketing  
Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry  
phone (404) 639-0501  
fax (404) 639-0522

> Chicago-area homeowners told to test homes for mercury contamination  
>  
> August 30, 2000  
> Web posted at: 1:13 PM EDT (1713 GMT)  
>  
> CHICAGO (AP) -- An estimated 200,000 homeowners across  
> Chicago's  
> northern and western suburbs should have their homes  
> tested for possible  
> contamination by the toxic metal mercury, a utility  
> says.  
>  
> Nicor Gas officials said that of 255 homes inspected as  
> of Monday, 43 had

> higher-than-normal mercury levels.

>

> Earlier this month, the Naperville-based gas company

> started inspecting and

> cleaning homes in 11 suburbs where workers from a

> contractor had spilled the

> liquid mercury in basements while replacing old gas

> regulators, which control the

> flow of natural gas.

>

> On Friday, Nicor detected mercury in a home where one of

> its own technicians

> had removed an outdated regulator.

>

> As a result, the company said Tuesday, it was planning

> to notify 200,000

> homeowners of the need for inspections.

>

> Mercury poisoning can damage the brain and kidneys, and

> can harm a

> developing fetus.

>

> Nicor made its announcement as 10 families in Lombard,

> Park Ridge and Mount

> Prospect sued Nicor and its subcontractor,

> Pennsylvania-based Henkels &

> McCoy. Another lawsuit was filed against Nicor last

> week.

>

> "It's obviously a serious problem, and the scope of the

> problem continues to

> expand," said attorney Shawn S. Kasserman of the law

> firm representing the

> families. They seek damages of more than \$50,000 for

> each person exposed to

> the spilled mercury.

>

> Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan said Nicor told his

> office Tuesday that it

> could take up to six months to complete the inspections.

> "And I told them that

> six months was too long and they needed to move along,"

> he said. Nicor said it

> would work to speed up the inspections.

>

> A Nicor spokesman did not return telephone calls seeking

> comment Wednesday.

>

> Nicor is paying for blood and urine tests, and the

> Illinois Department of Public

> Health said Monday that results which had come back so

> far show only one

> person out of 10 with an elevated level of mercury.

>

> Mercury, a silver, odorless liquid sometimes known as  
> "quicksilver," was used in  
> everything from thermometers and blood pressure gauges  
> to older gas meters.  
> Most health experts agree that short exposures to small  
> amounts are relatively  
> harmless -- for example, when a thermometer breaks. The  
> trouble comes, they  
> say, when the liquid vaporizes.

>  
> One of the families that filed suit -- Chris and Laura  
> Denver and their two  
> toddlers -- have been evacuated from their Mount  
> Prospect home since July 20.

>  
> "It's as if the house burned down. We've lost  
> everything," said Denver, adding  
> that environmental consultants have told him they never  
> will be able to live in the  
> house again.

>  
> Denver said that since a gas regulator was removed from  
> their home, he and his  
> wife have had headaches, muscle spasms and  
> forgetfulness, and skin peeling  
> from their feet.

>  
> "The thing that was most difficult was watching them  
> throw out all of my  
> children's birthday and Christmas toys, bag by bag,"  
> Denver said. "That has the  
> most sentimental value because we watched them as we  
> gave (the gifts) to  
> them."

>  
> —  
>  
> On the Net:

>  
> Purdue Univ. Mercury Risks:

> <http://danpatch.ecn.purdue.edu/~epados/mercury/pano/src/mercrisk.htm>

>  
> Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry:  
> <http://www.ATSDR.cdc.gov/tfacts46.html>

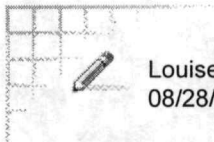
>  
> Nicor Gas: [www.nicor.com](http://www.nicor.com)

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>  
> Oona Powell



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- > National Center for Environmental Health, CDC
- > (770) 488-4893
- >



Louise Fabinski  
08/28/2000 11:02 AM

To: BRAD STIMPLE, krunkle  
Subject: CNN (Camp Lejeune) and USA Today (mercury spill in IL) -- Interview today

fyi

----- Forwarded by Louise Fabinski/R5/USEPA/US on 08/28/2000 12:02 PM -----

bos1@cdc.gov on 08/25/2000 05:30:36 PM



To: hxf1, pj3, jal2, ssc1, jur2, txf5, Louise Fabinski, aaw2, zqi7, gaj2, dbg3, cyd0, hjh1, jsh2, ran2 cc: slh8, Jvf6, z

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We had two interviews today with major media outlets. Both interviews were coordinated through CDC Office of Communications staff.

1. USA Today Interview:

I handled a call from USA Today, reporter Julie Applebee, on the NICOR gas company mercury spill issue. Questions were of a general nature re: our agency's involvement. Most of the questions needed to be directed to the EPA or to NICOR. She did ask about the new guidance being considered by the EPA re: mercury and the National Academy of Sciences report on mercury. I used our talking points (developed with Dr. DeRosa) to state our position. I do not expect that we'll be quoted but we will probably see a story on the topic.

Below is Jim Holler's "heads up" to me on the NICOR issue FYI. A special thanks to Jim and Louise Fabinski for alerting our office prior to any media calls. We've fielded several others on the spill this week, including one from the Chicago Tribune.

Rich Nickle ATSDR Emergency Response --

FYI, the Chicago news media - fairly well collectively - has gotten a hold of the situation we've been working on for several weeks with IL Health. One of the residents in one of the homes in Park Ridge, IL is suing the NICOR natural gas company for \$1M due to a mercury spill that occurred while NICOR was doing maintenance on the resident's gas meter. Some of the media has gotten the idea that some of these homes will have to be destroyed by EPA or NICOR, although that may not have been broadcasted/published yet. It appears that the combination of the media attention resulting from the lawsuit, the lawsuit itself, and the number of homes involved has sort of started an tidal wave of community concern and alarm. ATSDR Region V has been involved in dealing with inquiries most of the day and is attending a meeting tomorrow with various senior State personnel.

Many of these spills happened last fall. In the first few homes looked at, most of the mercury levels have been either safe or isolated from the rest of the home. However, if any mercury is detected in the home, NICOR is

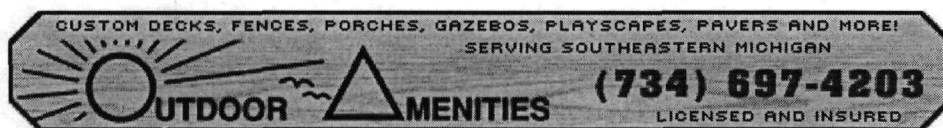
paying for a clinical evaluation of the residents and for relocating those residents which can't be isolated from the source of mercury. If there are any questions about the Park Ridge homes or NICOR, the Region has asked that we please refer them to EPA Region V, ATSDR V, and the State of Illinois for now. They will screen the questions and forward any issues that are new or haven't been fully explored as yet.

## 2. CNN Interview:

Media officer, John Florence, coordinated an interview between CNN and Marie Socha, Health Studies, regarding the Camp Lejeune study. The interview was conducted on the phone with taping likely in the near future. The story is still under development. Here's a synopsis of today's discussion.

- > The interview this afternoon between Marie Socha and CNN's Tina Ver went well. As anticipated from my preliminary discussion with Ms. Ver, she
- > asked how and why ATSDR became involved with the Camp Lejeune site, which
- > chemicals we were looking at, and the scope of our project with regard to
- > the division of labor between Lejeune and ABC Cleaners.
- >
- > Other questions during the course of the interview were to explaining
- > apparent time lag (1986 - present) between when water wells at Lejeune
- > were closed and ATSDR's project today, the level of cooperation we were
- > receiving from the Marine Corps, and the status of identifying and
- > interviewing former base residents germane to the project.
- >
- > Marie did an excellent job providing Ms. Ver information about each of
- > these topics. In addition to explaining our initial involvement with
- > Lejeune because it was added to the NPL, Marie described the site
- > assessment, explained why it was a lengthy process, and noted that Lejeune
- > was not a single site but actually a collection of 21 locations -
- > something Ms. Ver did not previously know.
- >
- > It also was noted that cooperation with the Marine Corps has been
- > excellent, both at the national and installation level. Several questions
- > regarding early actions the USMC may or may not have taken were deferred
- > with the suggestion to contact USMC officials (for example, when were base
- > residents notified of a potential problem and did officers receive
- > allotments of bottled water while families of enlisted Marines did not).
- >
- > Regarding the interview process, Marie explained that the list of base
- > residents provided by the Navy, which is one-third of the population
- > targeted for the project, has been contacted but that progress identifying
- > the remaining two-thirds is a slow and time-consuming. I added that we did
- > not know why the Department of the Navy only provided us with one-third of
- > the identities ATSDR requested, but were hopeful that the department would
- > assist us by furnishing us the complete list.
- >
- > The interview ended with Ms. Ver saying that she probably would want to
- > talk to Marie again later as the story took shape. She was not able to
- > provide a date when the story may air.
- >
- > JF




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**Sunday**  
**October 15, 2000**



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## News

### Heritage Sunday

A Heritage Newspaper

## Houses re-tested for mercury contamination

*By Tiffany Quail, Heritage Newspapers*

Thirty-five Detroit-area houses have been retested for mercury contamination and nine of them still have high mercury levels.

In September, MichCon reported to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency that mercury was spilled in 35 houses while gas regulators were being replaced in the 1990s.

Although the spills were cleaned up immediately, the retesting shows that MichCon's cleanup was not done well enough, said Ralph Dollhopf, the EPA's on-scene coordinator.

"The EPA is concerned that overall MichCon wasn't very good with the issue of mercury," he said.

Dollhopf said the decision to conduct the reinspection of the houses is a result of a contamination incident that occurred at a Lincoln Park house in August.

At that time, employees spilled mercury when they removed a gas regulator.

In addition, utility companies in Chicago have been dealing with a series of mercury spills.

After learning about those incidents, the EPA in September asked MichCon to check into the houses it services, Dollhopf said.

MichCon reported the spills that had occurred in the 35 houses and the cleanups that were done.

Dollhopf said the EPA was told that the first time MichCon cleaned the houses the mercury levels were the same as those acceptable for work laces.

He said acceptable occupational levels are higher than residential levels because people spend a lot less time at



work than they do in their houses.

The EPA now wants MichCon to look into the contamination problem closely to see if there are more affected houses.

"We want MichCon to identify the homes in their system where these regulators have been replaced so that they can double check that the equipment was taken out safely and that no mercury was left behind," EPA spokesman Mick Hans said.

MichCon's spokeswoman Amy Messano said about 150,000 of MichCon's 1 million residential customers have had this type of regulator.

Messano said MichCon employees are going through files to pinpoint where the regulators were installed.

Dollhopf said MichCon has been checking into the matter since August.

"We're tired of hearing that they are looking into it," Dollhopf said. "We want the people to know that there could be a problem."

Although the regulators are safe, the problem arises when they are removed because mercury that is stored in the regulators' cast iron cups can leak out, Messano said.

The regulators are used to help measure the pressure of gas flowing into a meter. Houses that started natural gas service between the late 1930s and the late 1950s would have this type of regulator, Messano said.

She said the amount of mercury spilled varies; however, the most that would have leaked out is two teaspoonfuls.

As soon as the mercury is released, Messano said, MichCon employees clean it up and test the mercury level of the house.

"MichCon has well-trained employees that follow rigorous procedures when they deal with mercury," she said.

Messano said there are two ways MichCon cleans up mercury spills.

One method requires the use of a special mercury vacuum. The other technique uses a special cleaner that clumps the mercury together and catches it in one spot, she said.

To test the mercury levels, MichCon had used a hand-held device called the Jerome, Messano said.

The 35 houses passed the test, which means mercury levels in the air were at or below the EPA's guidelines that are

considered safe, she said.

The leaks were taken care of at the time they happened. However, new technology has enabled MichCon and the EPA to conduct a voluntary retesting program for the affected residences, Messano said.

The reinspection entails using a device called the Lumex, which is 1,000 times more sensitive in detecting mercury than the Jerome, she said.

If residents have questions about the mercury gas regulators, they should call MichCon's toll-free mercury hotline at 1-877-856-7093. The line is open from 7 a.m. to 8 p.m. Mondays through Fridays and from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Saturdays. It is closed on Sundays.

*(Staff Writer Jodi Haughton contributed to this report.)*

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**By David Rohn**

*September 19, 2000*

Usually, Indiana Department of Environmental Management employees go out to investigate hazardous spills.

But this one came to them.

About 120 department employees were evacuated about noon Monday when beads of mercury were discovered in their Eastside office.

Testing showed no health threats to the employees or anyone else in the former Western Electric Co. building in the 2500 block of North Shadeland Avenue, said Russ Grunden, an agency spokesman.

Grunden said a member of the agency's emergency response section spilled the liquid metal. He refused to identify the employee.

Thursday, the employee had unwittingly picked up a mercury spill kit containing a device similar to a turkey baster, which is used to suck up spilled mercury. It contained residual mercury from an earlier cleanup, Grunden said.

"We're trying figure out how that happened," he added.

Monday, the employee noticed small beads of mercury from the kit got on the seat of the employee's chair, his car seat and in a stairwell at the agency's office complex.

According to Grunden, more than 200 people who work in the department's emergency response, water management and air monitoring sections are housed in the building. Many are out working in the field at any given time.

Grunden estimated about 120 workers were evacuated "as a precautionary measure" during a long wait to obtain a properly functioning mercury monitor from Indiana

University-Purdue University Indianapolis.

Shoes of all employees were checked to make sure no one stepped in the mercury and was tracking it.

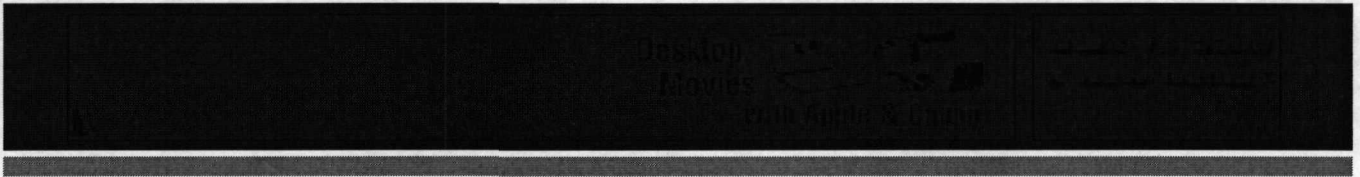
The department occupies the southern half of the huge building. Mutual Hospital Services, which is in the other half, is on a separate ventilation system and was not at risk,

Grunden said. Only environmental management employees were evacuated. He expected the agency to be back in full operation today.

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Mercury spotted; offices evacuated  
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**▲ News****Southeast****Gas line rupture leads to evacuations****Accidental break affects schools, homes***Thursday, September 28, 2000***By Brent Watters**  
**Staff Writer**

Two schools and a number of homes in Monee were evacuated after an underground natural gas line was accidentally ruptured by Commonwealth Edison workers Wednesday morning.

Shortly after 11 a.m. ComEd workers cracked open the Nicor line while putting in a utility pole on the northeast corner of Linden and Mill streets, Monee Police Chief Russel Caruso said.

"The smell of gas was really strong in the area so we decided to evacuate the residents living in a four-block area of the leak as a precautionary measure," Caruso said.

While police went going door-to-door evacuating residents from their homes, students from St. Paul Christian School had already been moved to a cemetery next to the school.

The school, which has an enrollment of 43 students, is located at 5323 W. Margaret St., just a half block from where the leak occurred.

"I smelled a strong presence of gas in the school. First I checked our stove and then I opened the front door of the school. The smell of gas was much stronger outside than in the school. That was scary," St. Paul Principal Jean Turek said.

"Some teachers were already complaining of having a headache, so we quickly made our way to the cemetery," she said.

As gas continued to pour out of the two-inch main, Caruso had police officers escort the students from the cemetery to Monee Elementary School, located at 5154 W. Main St., just three blocks north of St. Paul.

But winds began to blow the gas north, causing the gas to seep into the elementary school, said Steve Humphrey, superintendent of Crete-Monee Consolidated Unit School District 201U.

"We followed our emergency plan and moved the children from our school to the Golf Vista Recreation center located directly behind the school," Humphrey said.

As Nicor crews continued to work through the afternoon to cap the leak, officials from the two schools ended the school day and called parents to pick up their children from the recreation center.

Kellie Sollos had just returned home from work when she received the message on her telephone answering machine.

"They said that my daughter Bailey was at the senior center because of a gas leak and school had to be closed. But they said the children were moved to the senior center," Sollos said.

"I didn't panic until I got to the senior center and was told that Bailey wasn't there. I finally figured out that the children were down the street at the recreation center," said Sollos, whose daughter attends St. Paul.

Humphrey and Turek said they expected school to be back in session today.

Nicor spokeswoman Carmen Morales said Nicor workers were able to cap the two-inch pipeline shortly before 3:30 p.m.

Morales said the company planned to replace the broken section of pipe and go into the homes to restore gas service.

"Everyone will be back in their homes tonight," Morales said Tuesday afternoon.



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## Couple planted mercury for the money, cops say

By Mick Zawislak Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted on August 22, 2001

An Arlington Heights couple planted mercury throughout their home and accepted new clothes and other items after being forced to leave, but believed there could be a much bigger payoff, authorities charged Tuesday.

"What they would gain is all-new furniture, all-new clothes, all-new tools - everything new. And then they had the ability to file a civil suit against Nicor (Inc.) for monetary amounts," said William Martin, commander of criminal investigations for the Arlington Heights police department.

Martin alleged that William Fritz and his wife, Alanna Weber-Fritz, of 218 E. Thomas Ave., wanted to strike it rich by cashing in on the mercury scare, which at the time was becoming an escalating problem for Nicor, the Naperville-based natural gas supplier for most of Chicago's suburbs.

"They had hired a lawyer that probably would have brought a civil suit," agreed Allan Slagel, assistant to Brian Crowe, a special prosecutor working for the Cook County state's attorney's office.

As it stands, authorities say the pair planted mercury in the home, where they lived with their four children, then aged 8, 11, 12 and 16, and a dog as part of a deliberate deception.

Fritz, 44, and his wife, 38, were indicted Monday by a Cook County grand jury. Each faces felony charges of theft by deception of more than \$100,000, which carries a possible prison sentence of four to 15 years; attempted theft, with possible time of three to seven years; and conspiracy to commit theft, with a possible one- to three-year term.

While the couple was not available for comment, attorneys representing them say the two are "devastated" by the charges and plan to plead not guilty.

The events occurring between Sept. 6 and Oct. 6 last year cost Nicor more than \$278,000, Crowe said. Nicor estimated the amount at \$290,000.

Most of that was spent to clean the home of mercury, while about \$35,000 was spent for their meals, lodging, clothing, gasoline, school and medical supplies, limo service and other expenses. The Fritz family left the home for about three weeks during the investigation and cleanup.

"We believe this to be an opportunistic crime manufactured against Nicor Gas," Martin said.

"The intent was to defraud," Crowe said. Although he didn't say where the couple got the mercury, "It's very easy to find," he said.

They knowingly created a "false impression" and took a "substantial step" toward theft, the indictment alleges, by alerting Nicor, contacting the media and consulting an attorney.

The pair have not been arrested and are not considered a flight risk. They are expected to turn themselves in to police at an arraignment Sept. 11.

"They're absolutely heartbroken and devastated by this indictment - and surprised," said Mike Gillespie, a Chicago attorney representing the couple in the criminal case.

Gillespie said the couple passed a lie detector test and that one of the questions was whether they had planted the mercury. The couple bought the home last year but the previous longtime owner had operated a heating and air conditioning business that may have been the source of the mercury, he said.

"That definitely is an aspect that will be investigated," he said.

Much of the detail of how or why the couple came to this point will be left for the trial, authorities said.

As the potential impact of Nicor's problems with mercury contamination began to spread last fall, the Fritz family became a media-friendly example of the devastation that could occur.

Forced to leave their home in what Nicor admitted was among the worst cases of contamination it would encounter, the Fritz family's plight was well-documented as their belongings were hauled onto the front lawn and cleanup crews in protective clothing worked inside.

Nicor almost immediately determined it was not responsible for the five visible mercury spills found throughout the home. The company and now prosecutors say there never had been a mercury-containing pressure regulator in the home, which was the source of most of the contamination throughout the suburbs, and that Nicor wasn't responsible.

Overall, more than 175,000 suburban homes were inspected as part of a court-ordered process. Of those, 957 tested positive for traces of mercury.

Several civil suits have been filed against Nicor, with the Chicago firm of Corboy & Demetrio representing about 10 families. The firm had consulted with Fritz and Weber-Fritz but had not filed suit against Nicor on their behalf.

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## Couple indicted in mercury spill

By Mick Zawislak Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted on August 21, 2001

An Arlington Heights couple, who were forced to leave their home last fall because of mercury contamination, face conspiracy and other charges in connection with the incident.

Bill Fritz and Alanna Weber-Fritz were charged with theft, attempted theft and conspiracy in an indictment returned Monday by a Cook County grand jury, six months after a special prosecutor was named to investigate the case for the Cook County state's attorney's office.

Authorities are expected to release details about the felony charges today.

Both Fritz and Weber-Fritz will plead not guilty to the charges and will turn themselves in, one of their attorneys said Monday.

"We intend on entering a plea of not guilty, and we expect this to be straightened out when we get to trial," said Terry Gillespie, a Chicago attorney representing the couple.

"They won't be arrested and we'll turn them in," he said. Fritz and Weber-Fritz could not be reached for comment.

Neither Arlington Heights police nor special prosecutor Brian Crowe would comment on the charges.

In mid-September, Fritz, Weber-Fritz, their four children and a dog were told to leave their home at 218 E. Thomas Ave., after visible beads of mercury were found in five locations.

Workers in special protective suits removed furniture and other items from the home, and the family became the subject of media reports at a time when Nicor, the Naperville-based natural gas provider, was continuing with a court-ordered inspection program that affected hundreds of thousands of suburban homes.

Nicor disputed the findings at the Fritz home. The company said it was not the source of the spill because the home never had an old-style gas pressure regulator, which was the main source of spills in the suburbs.

Nicor determined the spills occurred a few days after a Nicor crew



inspected the home and found no visible traces of mercury.

"It was not our mercury," Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte said Monday.

Those findings prompted Fritz and Weber-Fritz to take a lie detector test, the results of which showed no deception was indicated, when the two were questioned about the spill, according to their lawyers.

Nicor spent an undisclosed amount to clean the home of mercury.

Cook County prosecutors decided to take a closer look and instructed Arlington Heights police to investigate. The unnamed results of that investigation were referred to the Cook County state's attorney's office and then to Crowe, a former corporation counsel for the city of Chicago.

Spill: Residents will turn themselves in to police

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## Agency reviewing spilling of mercury in Mount Prospect

**BY ERIN HOLMES Daily Herald Staff Writer**

The Illinois Commerce Commission is looking into how mercury spilled from natural gas meters and contaminated 11 homes in Mount Prospect and Lombard.

Employees of Pennsylvania-based Henkels & McCoy, working as subcontractors for Nicor Gas, spilled mercury in four Mount Prospect homes July 12 while removing old gas meters from the inside of the houses.

The Lombard spill occurred in June as crews worked to remove meters from inside one home. Officials believe traces of the toxic, silvery liquid then were tracked into six nearby homes by neighbors who visited the first home.

Nicor could face penalties in the wake of the spills, said Brian Sterling, a spokesperson for the Illinois Commerce Commission, which oversees utility companies.

Each of the old meters, which date back to the 1960s, contains about a tablespoon of mercury, a toxic chemical that can cause tremors, memory loss and kidney disease.

Two Mount Prospect people were taken to hospitals, examined and released after the spills there. The other residents of the four houses also were checked for mercury levels and cleared.

None of the people living in the affected Lombard homes have reported any symptoms.

After the Mount Prospect spills, the Lombard homes were checked because the same meter replacement work had been done there. The houses were then found to be contaminated.

For more than two weeks, crews working on the Mount Prospect homes have scoured and scrubbed, in some cases removing floor tiles, carpeting, furniture and paneling, in attempts to clear the homes of any remaining mercury.

Mercury, which looks like liquid silver, can evaporate and become vapor that tends to hover close to the ground. The vapors slowly can inundate a home, soaking into floors and furniture.

Before residents can move back in, air-quality tests will be conducted to ensure that no mercury vapor is lingering. If traces of the odorless, toxic liquid remain, the cleanup process will continue.

"The key is, we want to make sure everything is safe," Nicor spokesperson Lee Haines said.

A resident of one Mount Prospect home, on the 700 block of South Elmhurst Road, has moved back in. Other affected residents on the same block and on the 800 block of South Elmhurst Road have not

been allowed back into their homes.

Daily Herald staff writer S.A. Mawhorr contributed to this report.

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**Daily Herald**

## 4-home mercury clean-up continues

**BY CHRIS CLAIR Daily Herald Staff Writer**

Environmental crews will continue working today to clean up mercury spills in four homes along Elmhurst Road in Mount Prospect.

Employees of a subcontractor working for Nicor Gas spilled the mercury more than a week ago when they were moving old gas meters from inside the homes to the outside, Nicor spokesman Janelle Jones said.

The two employees, who work for Pennsylvania-based Henkels & McCoy, performed the work on July 12, said one of the residents, who did not want his name used.

Mercury is a chemical that looks like liquid silver. It is toxic, odorless and evaporates much like water although much more slowly.

The homes affected are at 710, 718, 720 and 802 S. Elmhurst Road.

As he stood outside his house, surrounded by environmental crews and equipment, the man said he and his family had been feeling ill for several days. Thursday night he found a small pool of mercury in his basement.

When he connected the mercury with the gas meter work he called Nicor, which dispatched crews immediately. Within hours, Nicor employees were searching nearby homes that also had the work done.

Using special instruments, they found mercury in four homes.

Friday morning, environmental cleanup crews from SET Environmental in Wheeling started work at all four houses. They worked until 9 p.m. Friday and in that time finished cleaning 718 S. Elmhurst Road, where Pat Lacey lives with her two cats, Mikey and Lucky.

Work on the three other houses was expected to finish today.

Lacey learned of the mercury contamination when her next-door neighbor called, she said. She went downstairs and found a small tube of the liquid in a closet, near where workers removed her gas meter.

A few hours later, Nicor crews were testing her house.

"I was impressed with the way it was handled," Lacey said. "They certainly did a professional job and they did it compassionately."

Lacey planned to stay in her house Friday night. Residents from each of the other four houses were either not at home Friday or said they would stay elsewhere.

Because it is highly toxic, mercury must be carefully removed and disposed of. Environmental crews first scoop up as much mercury as they can see. Then they wash all the contaminated surfaces with a special soap. Ventilation clears mercury vapors, which tend to hover close to the ground.

Exposure to mercury vapor can lead to fatigue, memory loss, headaches, inflammation of the mouth and gums and other symptoms. Some of the residents with mercury in their homes complained of such symptoms.

Jones said Nicor routinely contracts out to move meters as part of its meter move-out program. Having gas meters outside makes it easier for crews to read them, she said.

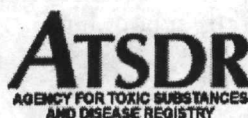
Some old gas meters contain mercury.

The meters in this case were moved in conjunction with a reconstruction project on Elmhurst Road. Nicor planned to move a gas main, and decided to move the meters at the same time.

Jones said once the houses are thoroughly cleaned and it's determined everyone is safe, the company plans to launch a full investigation.

A spokesman with Henkels & McCoy did not return a phone call seeking comment.

## **Daily Herald**



## National Alert

### A Warning About Continuing Patterns of Metallic Mercury Exposure

Metallic mercury is a hazardous chemical that can cause serious health problems. Children (especially very young children) and fetuses are most vulnerable. The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR), part of the U.S. Public Health Service, and the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) are jointly issuing an alert to the general public. There is a continuing pattern of metallic mercury exposure in children and teenagers and in persons using certain folk medicines or participating in certain ethnic or religious practices.

It is important for the general public to understand that either short-term or long-term exposures to metallic mercury can lead to serious health problems. Human exposure to metallic mercury occurs primarily from breathing contaminated air. Other forms of mercury can be absorbed by drinking contaminated water, eating food (usually fish containing mercury), and from skin contact. At high levels, metallic mercury can cause effects on the nervous system and the developing fetus. Other forms of mercury can damage other organs. Even at low levels, metallic mercury can cause health problems. *Metallic mercury exposure can cause harm before symptoms arise.* Once released into the environment, mercury is very hard to clear up. If it is left unattended where exposures can occur, it can have dangerous effects on human health.

#### Incidents involving schoolchildren

In recent years, increasing numbers of metallic mercury spills and contamination involving schoolchildren have been reported:

In August 1994, more than 500 students in Belle Glade, Florida, were contaminated with metallic mercury after three children found 4 jars (totalling 55 pounds) of metallic-mercury in an abandoned van. The local hazardous waste materials team decontaminated the children (removed contaminated clothing and washed the metallic mercury from their skin). More than 20 families had to be evacuated while their homes were decontaminated.

In November 1994, college students at Florida Atlantic University in Boca Raton, Florida, removed metallic mercury from one of the school's laboratories. Students living in the dormitory were evacuated and housed in a local hotel while the dormitory was decontaminated.

In June 1996, metallic mercury was taken from a middle school in St. Joseph, Missouri, and used in and outside of school by a group of teenagers. Approximately 200 children were tested for mercury exposure; one child was hospitalized and another five underwent outpatient treatment to remove the mercury from their systems; 20 other children had mildly elevated mercury levels. Two homes and a car required extensive decontamination.

In October 1996, a high school in Oskaloosa, Kansas and a convalescent home in Johnson County, Kansas, were contaminated with metallic mercury; 52 students and an unknown number of residents of the home were tested. On the basis of ATSDR recommendations, the school was closed for a week until indoor air levels were safe. A month later, sampling at the school identified an increase in air mercury concentrations. The school was re-evaluated and additional clean-up was done as recommended by ATSDR.



In November 1996, ATSDR again assisted state health officials and EPA in evaluating contamination at a high school and a home in Dallas, Pennsylvania, near Wilkes-Barre. Four areas in the school had levels of metallic mercury contamination that required cleanup.

In March 1997, a middle school student on his way to school found metallic mercury on the street in front of his home in Montgomery County, Pennsylvania. The student took the metallic mercury to school and shared it with three to four classmates. Also, in March 1997 a broken mercury thermometer was discovered after school on the floor of a bathroom stall in the boys bathroom. One thermometer was confirmed missing from the science department's inventory. The school was found to be clear of contamination with the exception of one science laboratory and the carpet in a classroom. Two homes required decontamination.

*Schoolteachers, particularly science teachers, and administrators need to be aware of students' interest in mercury, especially metallic mercury, and take steps to ensure that children are aware of its dangers and that any mercury kept in school is safely and securely contained.*

### **Incidents involving religious practices**

Persons who use metallic mercury in ethnic folk medicine and for religious practices are at risk. Metallic mercury is sold under the name "azogue" in stores (sometimes called botanicas), which specialize in religious items used in Esperitismo (a spiritual belief system native to Puerto Rico), Santeria (a Cuban-based religion that venerates both African deities and Catholic saints), and voodoo.

The use of azogue in religious practices is recommended in some Hispanic communities by family members, spiritualists, card readers, and santeros. Typically, azogue is carried on one's person in a sealed pouch prepared by a spiritual leader or sprinkled in the home or automobile. Some botanica owners suggest mixing it in bath water or perfume and placing it in devotional candles.

### **General facts**

The following are general facts about metallic mercury and its risks, as well as information about how people can protect themselves from exposure and resulting health effects.

### **What is mercury and how is it used?**

Mercury occurs naturally in the environment in several forms. Metallic Mercury is the liquid form used in thermometers. Mercury is also used in other common consumer products such as fluorescent light bulbs, barometers, medical equipment such as blood pressure measurement instruments, and mercury switches in children's sneakers that light up. This alert concentrates on metallic mercury, but hazards are also associated with other types. Of these, the most common is methyl mercury contamination of fish.

### **How could I be exposed to mercury?**

In the previously described school-associated cases, children were unaware of the dangers involved in exposing themselves and their families to this deadly poison. Adults are also often unaware of the hazards associated with mercury; some have even brought it home from work for children to play with. Just one-half teaspoon of mercury spilled in the home can be dangerous.

Adults using certain folk medicines or participating in certain religious or ethnic practices may also expose themselves and their families to metallic mercury's effects. Because metallic mercury vaporizes into the air at room temperatures, it presents an immediate health risk to anyone spending a significant amount of time in a room where metallic mercury is sprinkled or spilled onto the floor, or where opened containers of metallic mercury are present. Very small amounts of metallic mercury (for example, a few drops) can raise air concentrations to levels that may be harmful to health.

## **How does mercury affect health?**

At high levels, metallic mercury can cause effects on the nervous system and the developing fetus. Other forms of mercury can damage other organs. Even at low levels, metallic mercury can cause health problems. Mercury exposure can begin to cause harm before symptoms arise. Once symptoms do arise, health problems related to metallic mercury poisoning can include tremors, changes in vision or hearing, insomnia, weakness, difficulty with memory, headache, irritability, shyness and nervousness, and a health condition called acrodynia.

Pregnant women and their fetuses are especially vulnerable to the toxic effects of metallic mercury because it readily passes from the placenta to the fetus. Mercury may accumulate in higher concentrations in the unborn baby than in the mother. Young children, who often play on the floor where metallic mercury may have been spilled, are particularly at risk for effects on the central nervous system. Mercury vapors are readily absorbed into the bloodstream from the lungs, and the human central nervous system, which is still developing during the first few years of life, may become damaged.

Health effects can result from short-term or long-term exposure. The body gets rid of mercury through the urine and feces. Removal of this substance from the body can take up to several months after exposure. Acrodynia is characterized by itching, swelling, and flushing; pink-colored palms and soles of the feet; excessive perspiration; rashes; irritability; fretfulness; sleeplessness; joint pains and weakness. Children exposed to metallic mercury for long periods may have trouble learning in school. When mercury levels in the body are extremely high, "chelation" therapy is necessary. Chelation therapy involves putting a chemical into the bloodstream; the chemical combines with the mercury to aid in its removal from the body.

*Prevention is the key to avoiding poisoning in homes, schools, and families.*

## **What is mercury contamination and how can I prevent it?**

First, avoid using metallic mercury. Appropriate substitutes are available for nearly all uses of metallic mercury. Therefore, be sure you need to use it. If not, make arrangements to safely dispose of whatever metallic mercury you might have. If you do need to use metallic mercury, make sure it is safely stored in a leakproof container. Keep it in a secure space (e.g., a locking closet) so that others cannot easily get it. Use of metallic mercury in a controlled environment helps to reduce the risk that contamination will occur.

Mercury contamination results from exposure through the air, water, food, soil, or direct contact. Exposure to metallic mercury occurs when it is not stored in a closed container. Contamination may include the spilling of metallic mercury on clothes, furniture, carpet, floors, walls, the natural environment, and even the human body. Metallic mercury and its vapors are extremely difficult to remove from such items as clothes, furniture, carpet, floors, and walls. The vapors will also accumulate in walls and other structures in contaminated rooms. The contamination can remain for months or years, posing a risk to exposed individuals. The use of metallic mercury in a home or apartment not only poses a threat to persons currently residing in that structure, but also to those who subsequently occupy that dwelling and are unaware of the past mercury use.

## **Can I clean up mercury with a vacuum cleaner?**

Never use a vacuum cleaner. Using a vacuum cleaner causes metallic mercury to vaporize in the air, creating greater health risks. It also ruins the vacuum cleaner.

## **Can electronic equipment collect mercury vapors?**



Metallic mercury vapors can accumulate in electronic equipment, especially computers. When the computer is turned on, the mercury re vaporizes. This cycle of metallic mercury collecting and vaporizing from computers has been seen in several incidents in schools.

### **What should I do to keep my home safe?**

Metallic mercury is used in a variety of household and industrial items including thermostats, fluorescent light bulbs, barometers, glass thermometers, and some blood pressure machines. Care must be taken in handling and disposing of all items in the home that contain metallic mercury.

First, **do NOT** try to vacuum or heat the metallic mercury in any way. Mercury vapors are very dangerous and are virtually undetectable. Avoid breathing mercury dust, vapor, mist, or gas. Avoid contact with eyes, skin, and clothing. If you feel you have been exposed directly to metallic mercury, wash thoroughly after handling. Remove contaminated clothing and wash before reuse. Provide as much clean air as possible.

For example, if a thermometer breaks, remove children from the area. Clean up the bead of metallic mercury by carefully rolling it onto a sheet of paper or sucking it up with an eye dropper. After picking up the metallic mercury, put it into a bag or airtight container. The paper or eye dropper should also be bagged and disposed of properly according to guidance provided by environmental officials or your local health department. Try to ventilate the room to the outside and close off from the rest of the home. Use fans for a minimum of one hour to speed the ventilation. If larger amounts of metallic mercury are found (for example, a jar), make sure that the metallic mercury is in an airtight container and call your local health department for instructions in how to safely dispose of it. If the larger amount is spilled, leave the area and contact your local health department and fire authorities. *Do not simply throw it away, but instead seek professional guidance.*

ATSDR and EPA do not recommend the use of uncontained metallic (liquid) mercury (that is, mercury not properly enclosed in glass as it is in thermometers) in homes, automobiles, day care centers, schools, offices, and other public buildings.

### **Important Telephone Numbers**

- Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) Emergency Response Hotline (24 hours): (404) 639-0615
- ATSDR General Information: 1-800-447-1544
- National Response Center: 1-800-424-8802
- Superfund Information Hotline: 1-800-424-9346
- You may also call your local health department

For more information, contact:

David Barry  
ATSDR Office of Policy and External Affairs  
(404) 639-0500  
Email: DMB4@cdc.gov

### **Related Information**

ATSDR ToxFAQs: Mercury

EPA Press Release - July 11, 1997

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# Yes, ratings are low, but Marin and Co. deserve time to click

Chicago Tribune 9-20-00

**Y**ou don't see it in the nightly broadcasts, but these are critical times for "The 10 O'Clock News" at WBBM-Ch. 2.

The station's Carol Marin-led experiment in a smarter, classier nighttime newscast has the corporate gun to its head.

Nobody in authority will say it so bluntly, but if the severely ratings-challenged 7-month-old "10 O'Clock News" doesn't draw more viewers, and soon, it will have a hard time reaching its first birthday in February, or even the end of this calendar year.

That would be a crushing blow to hopes for local-TV-news reform nationwide and to Chicago viewers in particular. Even if WBBM's newscast isn't always the city's best on a given night (and it often is), it is always the most interesting, the one that looks and thinks and acts a little differently, daring to ignore the crime-health-weather-and-sports playbook.

Pulling the plug in the near future, something that the station's owners at CBS have

**Steve Johnson**  
ON TELEVISION



the power to do, would not prove anything about local news except that, once again, the people in charge of it have the patience of houseflies. Building ratings momentum in TV news is like heating up the ocean, and it is unrealistic to expect the new broadcast to overcome in eight months the news viewer alienation plan that Channel 2 spent the 1990s acting out.

"I don't have any white flags in my

office," Marin says. "Very few things in television, especially news, are runaway blockbusters. They take time to build, and part of that is building trust with your viewers, that you mean what you say and are doing what you said you'd do."

Asked how much patience she thinks CBS management will have with a newscast that is not producing ratings, Marin says, "I can't forecast that. All I know is that we operate in the same manner. ... Our meetings at 10 a.m. and 2 p.m. and 7 p.m. still deal with, 'What is the news?'"

And the operating theory, she says, is not to soften up or to start chasing ratings, but to "let the news dictate what the newscast is going to be."

For the most part, the on-air product suggests there is more truth than spin in that assertion. There are more "teases," brief previews of upcoming stories, now than in the early days, but they are neither relentless nor shameless, as in the station's old tabloid days.

More important, a close viewing of last week's newscasts showed no backsliding to the kind of format formula you see in virtually every other local newscast in America. Health news was not automatically accorded a place in the newscast. Weather, in the absence of anything unusual in the air, was still getting 90 seconds or less. There was almost no crime news and the lead story one night was about the judge in the Wen Ho Lee case upbraiding U.S. prosecutors, hardly the kind of thing a news consultant would tell you to start with if chasing ratings were the goal.

And there was the kind of tight, intelligent writing you rarely find elsewhere. Take this opening from last Thursday, the night of the fire in Commonwealth Edison transformers and more developments in the gas-company mercury scandal: "Tonight, for consumers, what seems like public utility hell. Com Ed, Nicor, Peoples Gas—all of them in the news, two of them under fire, one of them on fire today."

There is meat in those words, cleverness used to convey the real sense of exasperation people are feeling. A tough-minded first sentence means nothing, of course, without backup, and Channel 2 provided it, first with two solid reports on the mercury-gas meter problems, then two more on the downtown fire that first explained it, then cast it against the backdrop of Com Ed's woes from last summer.

Rivals have derided the Marin broadcast as "PBS on CBS," and, like its solo anchor, it is certainly not loose-limbed, even a little stodgy. But if invoking PBS means there is an aura of respect for the viewer's brainpower, and a willingness to do things like interview Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan live about the mercury issue, then it's a fair comment.

Still, even as quality remains high, the survival omens are not good. The station's two top news



Tribune photo by Candice C. Cusic

Carol Marin: "Let news dictate what the newscast is going to be."

managers left over the summer in the wake of May sweeps ratings down 13 percent from already low numbers the previous May.

Both said their departures—the general manager to teach and run a station in Winston-Salem, N.C., and the news director to direct news at two Seattle stations—were for personal reasons, but you surely don't leave a TV station in the nation's third-largest market for smaller cities if you feel you have the full confidence of your bosses.

In the aftermath of the changes, votes of confidence have not been forthcoming from CBS headquarters, where Marin's old nemesis, Joel Cheatwood, is now a power.

"I want to keep the newscast intact for as long as the new general manager wants to keep it intact," the ultimate boss, CBS-TV stations President John Severino, told the Tribune in July. (He is out of the country now and could not be reached for this article.)

The new general manager at WBBM, Walt DeHaven, is a man with scant news or Chicago experience. And his few public remarks have been more like cattle prods than back pats.

DeHaven calls it a "very noble venture," but also says, "We need to talk about internally what if any changes we need to make."

And ratings, he says, "most certainly have to improve. Everybody involved in the product knows that the report card and final mandate is the support of the viewers."

"We need to fill the news director's post and then really at that point sit down and set a course."

After Pat Costello's departure as news director in August, the obvious step affirming the direction of the newscast would have been to promote assistant news director Danice Kern, a respected Chicago news veteran and Marin's longtime friend and philosophical soul mate.

Marin treads carefully in talking about the situation, but she does say, "The newsroom, if it was going to take a vote, would vote for Danice in a second. She holds it together intellectually, spiritually."

That the Kern appointment hasn't happened yet makes it seem unlikely. Perhaps more ominous is the news that Cheatwood is involved, at least to the degree of being invited to submit names of can-

didates for the open position.

Cheatwood is the one-time boy wonder of tabloid television news who has revived his career after the ratings, public-relations and financial debacle he helped engineer at WMAQ-Ch. 5 in Chicago.

He and then-General Manager Lyle Banks, you'll recall, put their heads together and brought in Jerry Springer to be a WMAQ news commentator in May 1997. Marin and co-anchor Ron Magers fled the station, and ratings plummeted at second-place Channel 5, though not below the perennially third-place Channel 2.

Cheatwood eventually left town, resurfacing first in Philadelphia and now as the news head at WCBS-TV in New York and the top news executive for CBS-owned stations, a kind of "consultant" to their operations.

Marin had assurances from departed GM Hank Price that Cheatwood would not be consulted in Chicago. With Price gone, DeHaven says Cheatwood can submit news director names, but Cheatwood will not conduct interviews and the final decision will be DeHaven's.

"Chicago has a legacy," DeHaven says. "Joel is a curious part of that. We need to make our own way."

"Is he going to have a specific say or a definitive corporate say? No, not at all."

Clearly, the ratings are not pleasing to anybody except competitors. After an initial burst and steady stream of local and national publicity unseen in local news since the Springer debacle, better things were expected.

The numbers were up for February sweeps, but fell again in May, when the newscast again found itself trailing not only WLS and WMAQ, but "Friends" and "Simpsons" reruns on WGN-Ch. 9 and WFLD-Ch. 32.

In August, when the "Survivor" finale on CBS set a new record for summertime viewing, Channel 2's news did not even win that night; viewers, as they have habitually done for more than a decade, tuned over to ratings leader WLS.

Marin says she figures the station has now lost those viewers who were fans of former anchors Lester Holt and Linda MacLennan and their more traditional broadcast, and now is essentially building



back up from scratch.

Chicago broadcast veterans point to the patience it took for the city's last two major efforts that emphasized quality, rather than personality, to succeed. The Bill Kurtis-Walter Jacobson pairing at WBBM in the 1970s and 1980s nearly had its plug pulled before it started drawing big numbers. And the Marin-Magers pairing built its solid second-place audience very gradually, over some eight years.

Then there is the question of whether the audience for a newscast emphasizing a calmer, somewhat higher tone can be attracted any longer to TV news. The 10 p.m. viewership numbers went down across the board throughout the last decade, and general managers cheer now when they manage not to lose viewers.

The numbers they look at most

closely are those during the "sweeps" ratings periods, when local numbers are parsed more closely by Nielsen Media Research for the purpose of setting advertising rates.

The next major sweep is in November, and the best bet seems to be that this November will be do or die for Marin and Co.

She made it clear in February that she has language in her contract protecting her from having to front a newscast that does not meet her idea of good journalism.

So even if corporate CBS and/or DeHaven wanted to change horses or formats right away, even if Cheatewood is itching to take revenge on Marin for her primary role in the affaire Springer, they surely would not risk another public-relations blowup.

On the other hand, if ratings

again do not improve in November, management would have a somewhat graceful exit strategy, and another chapter in the depressing recent history of local television news could be written.

The problem there, however, is that WBBM would again be asking viewers to adjust to something new, and its helter-skelter news strategy through the 1990s is a big reason the station's rating hole got deep enough for it to even take a chance on the Marin format.

The station had better have a better idea in place, something that does not seem to be in ready supply in television news these days.

Indeed, if you are the manager who sandbags the Marin experiment, launched to great fanfare and national support, you are left, like the couple at the end of "The Graduate," asking yourself, Now what?

# News director choice raises questions on Marin show's future

By Jim Kirk  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

In a move that raises more questions than it answers about the future direction of its 10 p.m. newscast, CBS-Ch. 2 on Tuesday named an executive from an Orlando 24-hour local cable news channel as its new news chief.

Craig Hume, general manager of Central Florida News 13—a 24-hour news station partly owned by Tribune Co.—will join Channel 2 as its news director Oct. 16.

The 46-year-old Detroit native replaces Pat Costello, who left the station this summer to take over the news reins at KING-TV and KONG-TV in Seattle.

What is not clear by Hume's hiring is whether major changes are in store for the station's 10 p.m. newscast—overhauled in February in an effort to provide a more serious and in-depth take on the day's news behind anchor Carol Marin.

Though the newscast has received high marks from TV critics for its devotion to enterprise journalism, it has failed to resonate with viewers.

In May, ratings were down 13 percent from a year earlier.

Then, in July, Hank Price, former general manager at the station and the key backer of the newscast, left the station to become president and general manager of WXII-TV in Winston-Salem, N.C. Weeks later, Costello left for Seattle.

Price was replaced by Walt DeHaven, a general manager at stations in Boston and Providence, R.I., with virtually no local news experience. DeHaven has reserved judgment about the Marin-led news-



Hume

cast, but said the ratings must improve.

In hiring Hume, the station passed over current assistant news director Danice Kern, a veteran of Chicago television news and favored candidate among many insiders at the station.

Had station executives selected Kern, a key architect and a passionate backer of the newscast, it would have been the clearest signal since Price's departure that top brass at CBS was fully committed to the newscast.

Neither Hume nor DeHaven were available for comment Tuesday.

In a statement, DeHaven said: "Craig Hume is a great leader with a strong commitment to quality news. He is a wonderful addition to an already exceptional team."

Still, the choice of Hume left many station insiders puzzled—not only because he's yet another news director hired without Chicago experience, but also because he has limited news management experience.

Before coming to Central Florida News in 1997, he had spent two years as news director of Tribune-owned KTLA-TV in Los Angeles.

He had worked at the station since starting in broadcasting in 1988, but left in 1996 after a dispute with his boss over the direction of the station's late newscast.

An executive at KTLA who worked with Hume characterized him as a straightforward news executive who eschews gimmicks. His dispute with his bosses at KTLA apparently centered on his desire to make a significant anchor change on the station's newscast, one source said.

Before jumping into TV in 1988, he worked as a public affairs executive and consultant for nine years. He also worked as a Washington correspondent and general assignment reporter for the Atlanta Constitution from 1974 to 1979.

# Angry attorney general mulls prosecuting Nicor

BY CHRIS FUSCO  
SUBURBAN REPORTER

Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan is frustrated with the way Nicor is releasing mercury contamination information and says he is continuing to explore criminal charges against it.

"I haven't been given all the facts. They keep changing," Ryan said Monday. "The problem, instead of narrowing, continues to expand."

Ryan was talking about a weekend court hearing where Nicor agreed to disclose all areas where mercury might have leaked from manometers, devices used to measure gas pressure at commercial sites including hospitals and schools. The Naperville company is checking about 240 places where the devices might have been used, and the state is doing followup testing.

Though Ryan is upset Nicor did not disclose the manometer problems sooner, spokesman Lee Haines said the company initiated the manometer inspections and reported them as quickly as possible.

Nicor also continues to screen homes where mercury might have spilled during the removal of old gas regulators. Up to 248,000 homes throughout the company's

service area might be affected, and Nicor needs to decide what to do with 105,000 other homes that continue to have old regulators.

Nicor has discovered mercury vapors in more than 150 homes. Broadcast reports Monday indicated mercury was discovered at a Tinley Park home. Most mercury contamination had been found in northwest and west suburbs.

Meanwhile, Peoples Gas found mercury at another house in Chicago's Mount Greenwood neighborhood, bringing to six the homes contaminated from old regulators.

## Metropolitan briefing

Chicago  
Tribune  
9-19-00

### CHICAGO

## Mercury alert brings caution on scams

Chicago police Monday warned that residents should be cautious if someone arrives at their door and announces an inspection for mercury.

"Don't let somebody into your house unless you know they're with Peoples Gas," said police spokesman Pat Camden. "If somebody comes to your house, they shouldn't be doing anything but looking for mercury contamination. There should be no fees, and they shouldn't be checking the fur-

nace."

The announcement was "a preemptive move" on the part of the police and not prompted by any reported illegal activity, Camden said. The announcement that 200 inspectors will visit the Clearing, Mt. Greenwood and Edison Park communities creates a ripe opportunity for con men, Camden said.

Since Friday, five homes in those neighborhoods have been found with detectable levels of mercury, officials said.



Chicago Tribune 9-18-00

# Spills provide 'lab' to study mercury threat

## Scientists see way to learn

By Jeff Long

TRIBUNE ENVIRONMENT WRITER

Mercury contamination in the homes of Nicor Gas customers may provide toxicologists with a large, real-life laboratory for studying the link between levels of the dangerous substance in the air and the amount that people absorb into their bodies.

The symptoms to expect at given levels of mercury in the body are well documented, said Mike Moomey, section chief for toxicology at the Illinois Department of Public Health.

But when does the air you breathe begin to be dangerous?

"There's not a lot of good data," Moomey said.

As Nicor tests the air in 200,000 suburban homes for mercury contamination and Peoples Gas tests 25,000 homes in Chicago, the unprecedented sampling could provide valuable information about the threat such spills pose, Moomey said.

"In the future when we have mercury spills, we'll have a better handle on what levels in the air result in what levels in the body," Moomey said.

In the meantime, don't panic.

"We're not expecting people to fall over dead from this," said Louise Fabinski, senior regional representative at the Agency for

Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, a federal agency that works with the EPA.

"We're not expecting severe neurological problems. But when people are exposed, they have a right to know what they are exposed to."

Moomey is eager to compare the results of air tests in homes where mercury was spilled with urine tests of people living in those homes. He expects to receive air test results from Nicor when they're in.

The urine test results that Moomey has seen don't mean much without knowing whether the people tested were exposed to mercury.

Nicor said 1,807 of the 200,000 had been tested by Friday.

Of those, 114 were contaminated. Thirty of those homes were cleaned and cleared for residents to return, and 84 are being cleaned, Nicor said.

Urine tests are being conducted at Lutheran General Hospital, Cook County Hospital and Provena Mercy Center in Aurora, Nicor said.

Moomey said that through Thursday, 907 test kits had been distributed at Lutheran General, the only hospital from which he has seen results. Results are in from 332 of 389 samples: None showed mercury levels above 10 micrograms per liter.

"I'm really hesitant to draw conclusions from the little bit of data we have," Moomey said.

Experts don't consider anything

SEE MERCURY, PAGE 2

# Mercury

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

below 20 micrograms per liter to be significant. At 20 to 100 micrograms per liter, people begin to show symptoms such as decreased nerve conduction and brainwave activity. Their verbal skills deteriorate. They have the early signs of tremors that, at higher concentrations, can make it difficult to write or to button a shirt.

A doctor at Cook County told Moomey that someone tested there at 23 micrograms per liter. Moomey said that is just over the borderline of where the earliest symptoms of mercury poisoning would appear. It would be easily treatable by breathing clean air.

"Most of the symptoms are reversible," Moomey said. "So once they are removed from the expo-

sure, then the symptoms disappear."

Here are the symptoms at higher concentrations:

At 100 micrograms to 500 micrograms: irritability, depression, memory loss, minor tremors and early signs of disturbed kidney function.

At 500 micrograms to 1,000 micrograms: kidney inflammation, swollen gums, significant tremors and nervous system disturbances.

Moomey said the urine test tells what a person's mercury concentration has been over the past 30 days, but not beyond that.

What can't be known, he said, is whether someone living in a contaminated home had a higher concentration in his or her system at an earlier date, when the concentration in the air of that person's home might have been higher.

But the information officials get will be useful.

"It will help with us knowing what levels in the air are actually dangerous," Moomey said.

Peoples Gas said Sunday that inspectors had found two more contaminated houses in Chicago's Edison Park neighborhood, on the Far Northwest Side adjacent to Park Ridge, late Saturday, bringing to five the number of city homes found to be contaminated, spokesman Luis Diaz-Perez said. None of the houses required evacuation, he said.

Two hundred inspectors will be back out at Monday morning going door-to-door in the Edison Park, Mt. Greenwood and Clearing neighborhoods. Inspectors have conducted 4,678 visual inspections out of 8,850 homes they have visited, Diaz-Perez said. Cards were left on doors where nobody was home. Peoples Gas hopes to finish the inspections by Sept. 29.

## METRO BRIEFS

### EPA finds mercury at hospital

Illinois Environmental Protection Agency inspectors discovered traces of mercury at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge after Nicor inspectors found none, a hospital spokeswoman said Sunday. The EPA on Friday found 12 to 20 mercury droplets the "the size of a pinpoint" in a gas meter area inside a concrete vault, said Adrienne Dimopoulos. "There was never any threat of contamination to anyone, employees or patients." The state inspectors found the substance during air tests and informed Nicor, which had uncovered no signs of mercury during its own visual inspection Thursday, Dimopoulos said, adding that Nicor cleaned up the substance Saturday. Peoples Gas plans to send 200 inspectors door-to-door today on visual inspections in homes in the Mount Greenwood, Clearing and Edison Park neighborhoods. Mercury traces were found in four of 4,678 homes inspected in Edison Park since Friday, Peoples Gas spokesman Luis Diaz-Perez said. That brings to five the number of Peoples Gas customers with traces of mercury in their homes.



Chicago Tribune 9/18/07

## In worst mercury case yet, family may lose everything

By T. Shawn Taylor  
and Ray Gibson

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

Beads of silvery mercury have been discovered throughout Bill and Alanna Fritz's Arlington Heights home in what officials Friday called the worst contamination yet to arise from a botched program to remove old gas meters from homes.

Even the couple's dog and their two Cadillacs were contaminated by mercury spilled when a gas meter was removed from the garage a year ago by Nicor Gas, officials said.

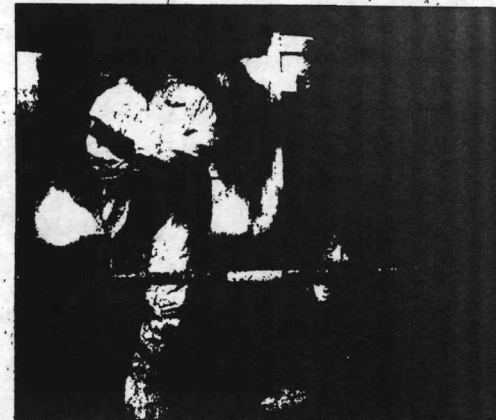
The Fritzes say they have been

told to anticipate losing everything in the one-story home in the 200-block of Thomas Street, where late in the afternoon furniture had been hauled onto the front lawn and wrapped in black plastic.

"They said the house is 90 percent contaminated and everything has to come out," said Alanna Weber-Fritz. "They told us we could take nothing."

The family even has had to have the dog shaved.

The Fritzes and their four children—ages 8, 11, 12 and 16—were evacuated late Thursday and put



Tribune photo by George

Alanna Weber-Fritz wears a protective jumpsuit Friday outs the family's mercury-contaminated Arlington Heights home

SEE MERCURY, PAGE 9

## Mercury: Arlington Heights family old house is 90 percent contaminated.

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

Nicor in a Rosemont hotel after an environmental crew measured high levels of mercury, particularly in the garage.

Readings on the paws of their 2-year-old sheltie were so high they had to leave the dog behind Thursday night when they left the house. They were told to strip off their clothes and place them in a plastic bag for disposal the moment they arrived at the hotel.

Beads of mercury also were discovered on a wheelchair ramp from the garage to the living room. Nicor attorneys said Friday that this was the first time visible balls of mercury had been identified since Nicor learned of the possible contamination of 200,000 homes in July.

"This quantity is unusual," said Nicor attorney Shawn Collins.

So far, Nicor has tested 8,333 homes; 152 have tested positive for mercury, company spokesman Craig Whyte said Friday.

Also Friday, a hearing scheduled in the civil suit filed against Nicor by the Illinois attorney general's office was postponed until 10 a.m. Saturday after the presiding judge was delayed by a train accident.

Lori Bolas, a spokeswoman for the attorney general's office, said Nicor and two contractors complied Friday with a court order to turn over corporate records.

Among the records sought by the court order issued Tuesday was a listing of all residences where crews might have removed mercury-filled regulators between 1990 and 1994. The Fritzes have yet to be tested for health risks associated with mercury exposure, including tremors, brain damage and mood swings.

With the two Cadillacs parked

inside the garage contaminated, only the couple's Suburban remains safe for use.

Nicor has rented them a minivan, which the couple used to take their contaminated dog to the veterinarian Friday morning to be bathed, shaved and tested. The dog was still there Friday night.

"I just got rid of the dog in a way that I don't know was safe because no one was here to ask," said a frustrated Weber-Fritz.

Late Friday morning, the Fritzes stood outside their house, which has been marked off with yellow tape.

They had been waiting since 8 a.m. for Nicor officials and a team from Heritage Environmental, one of two companies hired by Nicor in the cleanup effort.

The Heritage crew did not arrive until noon.

Alanna Weber-Fritz put on a white protective jumpsuit and yellow slippers and accompanied Heritage crew members inside the home.

The Fritzes bought the house in June from a couple who had lived there for 40 years. They have informed the couple of the contamination.

Nicor informed the family Sept. 6 that a meter had been removed in the past year and that mercury might have been spilled. A week passed before Nicor officials returned to take initial readings, Weber-Fritz said.

"We were told someone would be in touch with us about the cleanup," she said.

The Illinois attorney general's office, which has sued Nicor and two contractors to speed up the cleanup effort, intervened on the Fritzes' behalf after five calls to Nicor went unreturned, Weber-Fritz said.

Friday, she said she was worried about how her children would react to losing their belongings. Her 11-year-old son is worried about a baseball card signed by Ken Griffey Jr. Her 18-year-old daughter is worried about her Abercrombie & Fitch jeans. Her 8-year-old—her favorite doll.

Weber-Fritz said she is also worried about a rash that has appeared on her legs below her knees since they moved in.

Friday, Weber-Fritz, 37, wore a

new jogging suit and white sneakers bought the night before, when they were told to leave everything behind.

"That was the first time I cried—when they told me nothing can go out of this house," she said.

Bill Fritz, 43, a printing press demonstrator, got home at 5:30 p.m. Thursday after two weeks out of town on business. "We got put out at 6 o'clock," he said.

The Fritzes' children did not go to school Friday. But Weber-Fritz already is dreading the commute from Rosemont next week. They live across the street from Thomas Middle School, which two of her children attend. The other two attend Hersey High School and Olive-Mary Stitt Elementary School, blocks away.

"It's a real inconvenience," she said.

A teacher from Thomas, Donna Bingaman, walked over Friday morning to ask what was happening. Weber-Fritz told her she didn't want to sound the alarm among schoolchildren, especially her children's friends.

"I don't want kids thinking they can't be friends with them anymore because they'll get sick," she said. "I don't want them to be treated like lepers."

77 W. Jackson



50 CENTS

# Daily Southtown



House of the Rising Sun  
Living

## Tinley Park family is evacuated

### Mayor: Nicor found mercury contamination

By J. Carole Buckner  
Staff Writer

A family from Tinley Park's Parkside subdivision has been put up in an area motel by Nicor after inspectors found mercury contamination in their home, a village official said.

The action, taken by the company last Thursday, angered

Mayor Ed Zaborcki, who said. Nicor officials should have contacted village officials on Tuesday after the contamination was first discovered.

Instead, Zaborcki said he learned Sunday of the situation through the media.

"If only as a courtesy, (Nicor) should have contacted us," Zaborcki said. "I'm very angry

about this. It's reprehensible. "What if we had received calls from (the family's neighbors in the 6600 block of Hubbard) asking us why there was a home with yellow tape around it?"

The mayor added he heard that families in Lemont and Lansing also were put up in motels because of mercury contamination, although Nicor offi-

cials could not confirm that.

Zaborcki said the information was confirmed to him by a Nicor official.

Three weeks ago officials from the South Suburban Mayors and Managers Association received a letter from Nicor stating that homes in the south suburbs were not expected to be affected by mercury contamination, Zaborcki said.

"This gave us certain relief," he said. "Now with this, Nicor has a

major credibility problem with me," he said.

Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte said he was unaware of the Tinley Park home, but added that if a customer reports possible contamination to the company, the home is inspected and the necessary steps taken, depending on the outcome.

Whyte also said it has been the company's policy to contact village

See Mercury page 2



## Mercury

Continued from page 1

officials when contamination is found and that he would find out today what happened in this case.

The company serves 248,000 customers in the Chicagoland suburban area, he said. Of that, 15,000 homes, most in the north suburbs, have been identified as needing an inspection for possible contamination.

Of that number, about 150 homes have been found to be contaminated.

The Tinley Park contamination is yet another chapter in the utility's unfolding problems during the weekend.

Nicor reported mercury contamination in at least four industrial sites, three of them in Chicago Heights, county prosecutors announced.

The extent of the contamination at the industrial sites or when it occurred is under investigation, according to Adam Bottner, supervisor of the environmental division of the Cook County's state's attorney's office.

The latest news of contamination at the industrial sites prompted a Cook County judge Saturday to order the utility to provide a full list of all locations, including schools and hospitals that may

have or may have had any mercury-containing devices that it knows about to the Cook County state's attorneys, Bottner said.

The three sites in Chicago Heights, 317 E. 11th St., 1000 E. Lincoln Ave. and 1131 Arnold St., became known to the state's attorney's office after officials from the Illinois Emergency Management Agency informed them.

"Nicor reported to IEMA as they should have," Bottner said. "But they (also) should have reported it to us."

A contaminated fourth industrial site is in Cicero. The sites are among 254 that have manometers, large mercury-containing gauges used on gas lines in industrial or institutional sites.

Nicor has until the end of the business day Tuesday to submit the list.

"We hope with this latest (court) order, it will give us the tools we need to get our hands wrapped around this," Bottner said.

As they have done in the past, company officials agreed to cooperate.

The inclusion of the industrial sites amends a previous lawsuit against Nicor filed earlier this month requesting a list of homes that have or have had mercury-containing regulators.

Nicor and two contractors have been named in the five-count civil

suit filed by Illinois Attorney General James Ryan, Cook County State's Attorney Richard A. Devine and DuPage County State's Attorney Joseph Birkett.

The lawsuit alleges Nicor and the two out-of-state companies who handled the regulators endangered the public health and welfare, caused air pollution and open dumping, improperly disposed of waste and created a public nuisance.

The 150 homes have been contaminated with mercury from old regulators removed from basements, as well as three scrap yards, one in Chicago Heights, and possibly two Nicor service centers that handled the regulators.

Meanwhile, a crew from another natural gas supplier, Peoples Gas Co., which supplies 30,000 homes in Chicago, finished cleaning up a low level mercury contamination at a Mount Greenwood home, a spokeswoman said.

That family was put up in a motel, but People's Gas spokeswoman Desiree Rogers said she did not know if they had returned to their home as of Sunday.

Of the 30,000 homes, nearly 5,000 have been inspected so far by People's Gas crews, Rogers said.

Meanwhile, Zabrocki said residents can call Nicor at 1-888-288-8110 if they are concerned about mercury contamination in their homes.

## Textbooks

Continued from page 1

Alene Quinn (ce  
Orland Park hon

## Disease

Continued from p

Bernard Silver  
endocrinology at  
found the only  
unique blood test

The problem  
shipped to him in  
period.

So, specialist D



# to reveal all mercury sites

Continued from previous page

for the Illinois attorney general. "We think the order should give us everything we need."

Nicor has inspected the 254 sites and found mercury contamination at eight industrial sites, Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove and St. Andrew Nursing Home in Niles. Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte said the contamination was minor at all the sites, and no one's health was at risk.

All cleanup should be done later this week, Whyte said. Officials from the state Environmental Protection Agency are expected to revisit those same 254 sites to double-check Nicor's work, officials said.

Next week, Peoples Gas will begin inspecting about 1,800 locations in Chicago where manometers were once installed. The company reports one spill was discovered during the removal of two mercury-containing manometers from Midwest Energy's Fisk Edison power station at Cermak and Racine.

Peoples Gas hasn't been ordered by a court to provide information, but on Saturday, the judge in the Nicor case decided to hold weekly hearings to receive updates on Nicor's cleanup efforts.

"I think this case has to be closely monitored, and I intend to do that," Biebel said.

Nicor already has announced it will inspect about 248,000 homes, up from an earlier estimate of 200,000. Nicor officials said they bumped up the estimate to err on the side of caution.

No firm time line has been set for how long the Nicor inspections will take. The utility has said it will take about six months for the inspections, but state and county officials have said that's too long.

"If we can get it done any quicker, we will," Nicor's Whyte said.

Nicor estimates that about a third of those inspections won't even involve inspectors going inside the homes, but rather eyeballing the homes from the outside and being able to tell quickly whether the home was hooked up with a mercury device.

As for Peoples Gas, the visual inspections of homes in Chicago will take about two weeks.

Peoples Gas will have to reinspect homes where no mercury was found in visual inspection with devices that detect mercury vapors, once that equipment becomes available. The city wants to know by Monday when Peoples Gas will get that work completed.

Chicago Sun-Times 9-17-00

# Are health fears overblown?

BY CHRIS FUSCO  
SUBURBAN REPORTER

Bill Fritz moved into his Arlington Heights house just two months ago.

On Friday, he watched a mercury cleanup crew move his belongings onto the front lawn. Then they wanted to tow away his cars to decontaminate them.

"Everything is in bags," said the father of four. "Everything is in bags. They're checking everything with a probe. ... It's a mess."

A growing mess, but not a cause for panic, experts said. Mercury can damage brains, lungs and kidneys, but there are seldom any medical consequences involving the amounts of mercury found so far.

Late in the week, fear spread after a mercury discovery on the Chicago turf of Peoples Gas, then the discovery of more spills at businesses served by Nicor Gas.

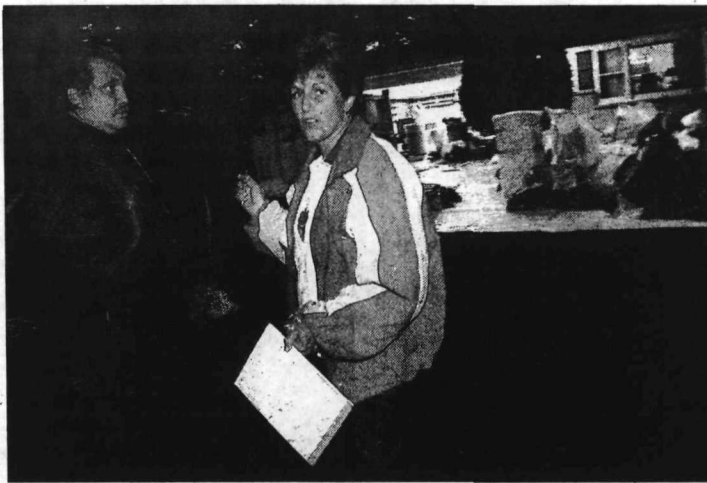
The Fritz family, whose home had one of the old gas regulators from which mercury spilled, plans to take blood and urine tests to check for any effects, said Shawn Kasserman, their attorney. Kasserman complained that Nicor hasn't fully informed the family of the cleanup's progress, a charge the utility denies. It does appear that the family will lose most of their belongings.

State officials want detailed information from the gas companies to make sure the mercury hasn't harmed the public.

"I don't think it's a cause for immediate panic. It's a concern," said Mike Moomey, toxicology section chief for the Illinois Public Health Department, which is monitoring urine tests for mercury. "We don't expect to see high enough levels to cause medical treatment."

The gas regulators contained about two teaspoons of mercury, Moomey said. That's not enough to create the kind of health threat that sent a 10-year-old East Moline boy to the hospital with kidney trouble in 1993.

He was playing with mercury he somehow took home from school and was rubbing it on his



RICHARD A. CHAPMAN/SUN-TIMES

Nicor Gas crews begin removing items Friday from the Arlington Heights home of Bill Fritz and Alanna Weber-Fritz.

arms to imitate the Tin Man in "The Wizard of Oz." Moomey described it as the worst mercury poisoning in state history.

"I think it is appropriate to be cautiously concerned and have your home tested," said Dr. Anne

Krantz, an occupational health and toxicology physician at Cook County Hospital. Still, "we're not aware so far of urine mercury levels that would be likely to be associated with symptoms."

Several people in the 150-plus homes where mercury has been found so far have complained of symptoms ranging from nausea to rashes.

One person registered 23 micrograms of mercury per liter of urine, slightly above the 20 microgram level the state considers worth following up on. Even so, the person is healthy, Moomey said, and doctors simply want to keep the mercury in mind should other conditions develop.

Moomey doesn't want to downplay mercury's threat. High-level exposure in contained areas can

*"I don't think it's a cause for immediate panic. It's a concern."*

**—Mike Moomey,  
Public Health Dept.**

damage major organs, and the state has yet to get enough test results to dismiss it.

Some of the 332 negative tests that medical officials have reported to the state, Moomey said, are from

people who did not have mercury-filled gas regulators. Hundreds of tests are expected to arrive in coming weeks from people who lived in homes where workers are known to have botched the removal of regulators.

The state also is awaiting detailed air test results from each contaminated home. Once airborne, mercury can stick to clothes, furniture, pets and people, who can move it from place to place. That's why the cleanup crew at Fritz's Arlington Heights home wanted to tow his two Cadillacs. His attorney talked them into keeping the cars on his property under quarantine.

Spilled mercury in a cool, dark space can slowly evaporate over several years. Contamination can

worsen if it breaks apart into several beads that cover a large area.

"When you just touch and play with it for a couple of hours, the exposure is minimal," said Moomey, describing how kids played with mercury from broken thermometers years ago and emerged unscathed. "Even if you swallow it, the exposure is minimal because it isn't very well-absorbed."

"It really depends on the original amount spilled and the concentration," Moomey added. "With two teaspoons [per regulator], I wouldn't expect anyone to be hospitalized."

Pregnant women and children run the greatest risk, Krantz said. She advised people who suspect they might have mercury in their basements to have them screened by Nicor or Peoples Gas.

Nicor has estimated 248,000 homes might be affected. Peoples Gas plans to screen at 30,000 homes in Chicago and more in eastern Lake County.

The mercury threat has Fritz, 43, worried about his family's health. His 36-year-old wife, Alanna Weber-Fritz, has a strange rash on her legs, which the family believes could be from their dog picking up mercury and brushing up against her. The animal was at the veterinarian Friday, while the rest of the family had moved into a hotel.

At least two lawsuits that include dozens of Nicor customers have been filed, and attorneys say health problems will become more clear over time.

For now, families are focusing on the inconvenience of moving into hotels and losing their personal belongings, as well as medical concerns.

Chris Denver and his wife, Laura, had their wedding photos bagged and thrown away from their Mount Prospect house. Virtually all their kids' toys are gone, too.

"You sit there and you think 'It's just stuff. You can replace it,'" said Denver, 31, whose wife is expecting the couple's third child in February. "But there were a number of items that had sentimental value."

Chicago Tribune

# MetroChicago

News from  
**CHICAGO**  
and the Suburbs

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 17, 2000 ■ SECTION 4

## Mercury found in 2 more city homes

### Nicor must file new site data

By Karen Mellen  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

Two more mercury-contaminated homes were discovered in Chicago on Friday night and Saturday, bringing the total to three in the city, and a judge Saturday ordered Nicor Gas to provide more information on the use of mercury-containing devices at all commercial and industrial

sites in the suburbs.

Peoples Gas representatives downplayed the discovery of mercury at two Edison Park homes, saying the levels do not merit evacuation. One woman decided to stay in a hotel Saturday night and another family stayed at home, said Desiree Rogers, a spokeswoman for Peoples Gas, a subsidiary of Peoples Energy.

As the company continues to inspect some 30,000 Chicago homes for mercury contamination, the next step will be to determine which homes in the North Shore communities should be tested for mercury spills, which

■ Pollution experts criticize Nicor on mercury-cleanup protocol. **Page 5.**

can happen when regulators are moved, Rogers said.

Rogers did not know how many North Shore homes would be tested. The first Chicago home found to be contaminated, in Mt. Greenwood on Chicago's Southwest Side, already has been cleaned up, she said.

A spokeswoman for the Illinois attorney general's office said representatives would meet with the

company to discuss testing procedures.

Meanwhile, saying they didn't want any more surprises from Nicor Gas, prosecutors obtained a new Cook County Circuit Court order giving the company until Tuesday to provide information on the use of mercury-containing devices at commercial and industrial sites.

Specifically, prosecutors want to know the location and cleanup protocol for manometers, mercury-filled instruments used to regulate gas pressure for large, non-residential customers.

Prosecutors said they were

caught off guard Wednesday when, a day after they received a court injunction forcing the natural-gas provider to do an inventory of the homes in which workers may have spilled mercury while removing gas regulators, Nicor notified them of mercury spills in non-residential locations with manometers.

So far, 10 sites with manometers have had some form of mercury contamination, including Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove and St. Andrew Life Center in Niles, said RoseMa-

SEE MERCURY, PAGE 5



# Mercury

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

rie Cazeau, chief of the environmental bureau of the Illinois attorney general's office.

"We believed we had our arms wrapped around the problem," Cazeau told Circuit Judge Paul B. Biebel at Saturday's hearing, but Nicor later disclosed more problems. "We just feel as if we're getting information in a piecemeal, fragmented fashion."

Representatives of the attorney general's and Cook County state's attorney's offices, which have joined DuPage County in suing Nicor, would not say whether they believed the company violated the original order by not disclosing information about manometers earlier. The company said there are about 250 manometers in the Chicago area.

Until last week, the investigation into mercury contamination focused on homes where old meters and regulators had been removed, locations where regulators were disassembled to remove the mercury and junkyards where the equipment ended up.

Prosecutors said the new order would shore up any gaps in the pre-

vious injunction, requiring the disclosure of any other instruments or machines that contain mercury.

The new order gives Nicor until Tuesday to list the locations of all manometers and any other mercury-containing devices and until Wednesday to provide a protocol to inspect all devices. Biebel also ordered weekly reports and status checks in his courtroom.

"I think this case has to be closely monitored, and I intend to do that," Biebel said.

John Berghoff Jr., an attorney for Nicor, told Biebel the company doesn't believe manometers pose as great a threat as the residential gas regulators because they typically were installed in boiler rooms, away from most people. Also, manometers were not replaced as often as the regulators, Berghoff said.

He acknowledged the contamination at Advocate Good Samaritan but said it was unknown whether the contamination came from the manometer.

At St. Andrew, the mercury was found in a building separate from the residential units and has been cleaned up, said Peggy Williams, spokeswoman for Resurrection Health Care, which oversees the nursing home.

"There was never any danger to residents," she said.



Chicago Tribune 9-17-00

# Experts call Nicor's mercury-

By T. Shawn Taylor  
and Ray Gibson

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

Nicor Gas' instructions to workers removing gas meters and regulators containing mercury had "glaring deficiencies" and may have contributed to widespread contamination of homes, scrap yards and Nicor service centers, according to pollution experts.

Those familiar with handling the toxic substance say requiring workers to extract mercury themselves, inside customers' homes, left open the chance for spills.

Nicor's instructions also allowed workers to rely heavily on the naked eye to determine the presence of mercury. When a spill occurred, workers were not asked to take readings for mercury vapor, according to Nicor's protocol for removing meters.

The protocol, released last week in response to a government lawsuit seeking more information on the mercury contamination, was dated Jan. 1, 2000, and superseded one from August 1996.

It is not clear whether the procedure was distributed among to workers from Nicor and the two subcontractors whose removal work has triggered the need for extensive testing in as many as 200,000 homes in the Chicago area.

Any protocol is difficult to assess because there are no state or federal regulations for removing mercury from gas regulators, officials said. Nor is there an industry standard for gas companies. There are penalties for violating environmental laws relating to mercury.

"The dilemma you have on any of these types of things that are mercury related is nobody really has a lot of experience," said Mark Edlund, president of Mercury Waste Solutions, a Minnesota-based recycler of mercury.

Still, Edlund said, Nicor's instructions contained "glaring deficiencies." Nicor would not comment on how the protocol was developed or implemented.

The procedure instructs workers to empty mercury cups removed from regulators outside rather than inside homes "whenever pos-

sible" and to discard regulators in the scrap dumpster "only when there is no visible mercury in or on the regulator."

Regulators with "visible" mercury are disposed of as hazardous waste, while the rest go to scrap yards, the protocol states.

Edlund said there's no way to look inside a regulator to determine the presence of mercury.

"That's how they ended up with mercury in the scrap yards," Edlund said. "You can't see inside [the regulator], so how would you possibly know that it's in there?"

The mercury is to be poured into a collection container. Officials for the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry in Atlanta questioned whether the opening on the container—at 1.5 inches in diameter—allows for pouring of mercury without spillage.

Mercury contamination has been found at four Nicor service centers and five junkyards where the regulators were sold for scrap. Authorities on Saturday said they had discovered spills at 10 commercial and industrial sites from a device called

# cleanup protocol insufficient

a manometer, used to measure pressure at meters on large gas lines.

Also last week, mercury was found in a home in Chicago's Mt. Greenwood neighborhood, an area previously serviced by Nicor that now belongs to Peoples Gas.

Some other gas companies, which have removed old meters from inside homes and installed new ones outside where they can be read more conveniently, follow more stringent protocols.

New York State Electric and Gas, in its ninth year of a 10-year campaign to replace 23,000 mercury-regulated meters, removes the regulator as well as the vent pipe, seals them and wraps them in plastic with the mercury intact, to be shipped to a recycler. There, the meter undergoes a thermal process that extracts the mercury while purifying it for reuse, Edlund said.

"We figured that's the safest way to do it," said Mario Martello, manager of gas quality assurance at NYSEG.

Martello said that spills have occurred during removal but that they were cleaned immediately, fol-

lowed by readings for the presence of mercury vapor.

Nicor's protocol does not call for follow-up testing after spills.

"If vapor testing was not conducted after a spill, Nicor was negligent," said Mark Wilhelm, president of Mercury Technology Services in Houston, which specializes in the cleanup of industrial pollution.

The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry agrees, saying that any spill and the resulting cleanup should be verified with a mercury vapor analyzer to ensure that the spill was cleaned up and no tracking had occurred.

The slippery nature of mercury dictates careful handling, scientists said.

"[Nicor] talks about visible droplets, but just getting the visible ones doesn't solve the problem," said Nicolas Bloom, a scientist for Frontier Geosciences in Seattle, which does research on mercury issues in the environment. "Mercury is easy to spill. It almost jumps out at you."

Long-term exposure to mercury, even in small amounts, poses seri-

ous health risks, including tremors and damage to the brain, kidneys and lungs.

NYSEG shared its protocol at a 1994 meeting of the American Gas Association, a group representing 300 natural-gas providers, of which Nicor is a member, said spokeswoman Daphne Magnuson.

She said she cannot recall that the subject of mercury has come up formally at an AGA conference since 1994. She said the association has no standard on handling or disposal.

"Mercury is used in far more applications—such as blood pressure measurement, thermometers, etc.—than in natural-gas operations," she said.

Because of the liability risks, gas companies are reluctant to share their protocols, even within the industry, she said.

Nicor's updated protocol was included in court papers in a civil lawsuit filed against the utility by Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan's office and county officials. The lawsuit is seeking speedy testing of the homes that may have been contaminated.



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## FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

September 16, 2000

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### City, US EPA to Monitor Peoples Energy Investigation

Officials from the City of Chicago and the US EPA today expressed concern about the possibility of more homes in the Peoples Energy service area contaminated by mercury. The agencies said they will closely monitor the company's progress in the coming weeks as it investigates at least 30,000 homes in the top-priority areas.

Peoples Energy has said they will inspect, first visually and then with monitoring equipment, the homes it has prioritized in its service area. Most of the homes are in the Mt. Greenwood, Clearing and Edison Park neighborhoods on the southwest and northwest sides of Chicago.

"Our inspectors and experts from the US EPA will review the results of Peoples Energy's inspection program. The City has called for a more detailed plan from Peoples Energy, including testing schedules and procedures, a detailed communications plan, and conclusive proof that areas currently excluded from the testing protocol are indeed free of contamination risk," said William Abolt, Chicago's Environment Commissioner.

Yesterday Peoples Energy workers discovered low levels of contamination at a second home, this one in the Edison Park neighborhood on the northwest side. Further testing and cleanup will begin today and Peoples Energy will continue visual inspections in the three neighborhoods. Crews inspected 600 homes yesterday.

Also yesterday Peoples Energy workers, overseen by US EPA and the Chicago Department of Environment, were able to clean up and ventilate the Mt. Greenwood home where contamination was discovered Wednesday. Mercury levels in the home have been reduced and officials anticipate the levels will be safe by the end of the weekend.

"Due to our experience with the ongoing Nicor problem, EPA and its intergovernmental partners are well-prepared to oversee any additional cleanup work that may come to light" said Francis X. Lyons, Regional Administrator

-more-





for the US EPA. "We hope it doesn't become necessary, but if a more extensive problem arises, EPA will bring to bear all of its legal authority to ensure Peoples Energy Takes full and immediate charge of this situation."

Abolt welcomed the US EPA's participation and expertise. "The two cases that have been discovered in Peoples Energy's service area have contained small levels of mercury. However, the existence of these cases underscores the need for Peoples to spare no expense as it moves quickly and thoroughly through its testing program."

###



# State gets Nicor list of possible mercury sites

*Daley letter prods Peoples Gas for cleanup details*

BY LUCIO GUERRERO  
AND FRAN SPIELMAN  
STAFF REPORTERS

At the 11th hour, Nicor officials on Friday handed over a list to state investigators of thousands of residents and businesses who had mercury-filled regulators removed from their property in the early 1990s.

The gas company turned the list over to Illinois Attorney General

Jim Ryan at the stipulated 5 p.m. Friday deadline, narrowly avoiding a \$5,000-a-day state fine.

Meanwhile, the Daley administration sent a letter Friday to another utility company, Peoples Gas, demanding detailed answers on how it plans to inspect 25,000 homes on Chicago's Northwest and Southwest sides.

Traces of mercury were found Thursday in a home served by Peoples Gas in the Mount Greenwood neighborhood on the Far Southwest Side. A police officer and his pregnant wife live in the home.

"We just want to make sure it doesn't start repeating itself every

week," Mayor Daley said. "We don't want four or five to appear next Monday and six more next Wednesday. No one is positive about this. We're on the side of caution. We'd like to have a little more information just to assure their customers and the citizens of Chicago."

State officials who received the Nicor list said they aren't sure it contains all the requested information.

"We are going to be reviewing all the documents over the weekend to see if they are in compliance," said Lori Bolas, a Ryan spokeswoman.

Ryan's office said the list would not be available to the public.

Along with the list from Nicor, Ryan's office also was demanding a list of employees and work sites from two gas company contractors, Northern Pipeline Construction Co. and Henkels & McCoy. Both companies turned over the information requested Friday.

Bolas said lawyers for the state will ask a judge to force Nicor to disclose any more devices used in people's homes that may contain mercury and to outline specifics of its plan to screen as many as 200,000 suburban homes.

"The attorney general basically does not want any more surprises," Bolas said.

State officials also are concerned that sites Nicor said it cleaned still showed traces of mercury.

On Friday, the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency ordered

Nicor to return to Advocate Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove and Kropp Forge in Cicero after investigators found beads of mercury after an attempted cleanup.

Nicor officials said they would order further cleaning of the sites.

In Chicago, aldermen of the seven wards involved in the emergency inspections—the 13th, 19th, 21st, 23rd, 34th, 41st and 45th—demand specifics on behalf of their residents, Environment Commissioner Bill Abolt said.

In the city's letter, Abolt made it clear that City Hall was not willing to accept at face value Peoples Gas' blanket assertion that there is "no potential for a problem in 75 percent" of its Chicago system.

"We're gonna ask them to demonstrate that to us conclusively," Abolt said.



For Immediate Release  
September 16, 2000

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## **Peoples Gas Reports Mercury Inspection Progress**

CHICAGO – Peoples Gas, a subsidiary of Peoples Energy, today detailed steps taken and the results of its program to inspect 30,000 Chicago homes for possible mercury contamination.

Peoples Gas employees have visited 3,398 homes and inspected 1,697 of them. Where admittance was not gained, cards were left instructing the occupants what phone number to call to set up an appointment for a return visit. The Peoples' call center has received 2,091 calls since Wednesday night.

Since Friday morning, low-levels of mercury have been found in two Edison Park homes. Peoples Gas has completed the cleanup at the Mount Greenwood home where a minute amount of mercury was found Wednesday evening. Residents were offered accommodations, despite the low-level of mercury found in their homes.

Today, Peoples Gas began inspections at 8 A.M. with a contingent of 100 employees. On Monday, Peoples Gas will field approximately 200 inspectors. Company employees are being apportioned among the three neighborhoods where pressure regulators containing mercury could have been used in the past.

The neighborhoods affected are Mount Greenwood, Clearing and Edison Park. The Mount Greenwood inspection area is bounded on the south by 119<sup>th</sup> Street, on the north by 99<sup>th</sup> Street, on the east by Ashland and on the west by Cicero. The Clearing inspection zone is bounded by 65<sup>th</sup> Street on the south, 59<sup>th</sup> Street on the north, Cicero on the east and Harlem on the west. There are three separate areas within the Edison Park inspection area. The first is bounded by Foster to the south, Bryn Mawr on the north, roughly Pacific to the west and Harlem to the east. The second area lies approximately between Central on the east, Narragansett to the west, Bryn Mawr to the south and Howard to the north. Devon, Howard, Harlem and Central are the approximate borders of the third Edison Park area.

Peoples Gas has mailed letters to all customers in the above described areas, notifying them of the inspection process. Peoples Gas is also communicating with the aldermen whose wards are affected to help them provide their constituents with the latest information on the inspections.

As Peoples reported Thursday, the inspections will occur in two stages. First, the company will perform visual inspections. Then, Peoples Gas will revisit each of the homes that had already been inspected visually and conduct an inspection with mercury detection equipment. Peoples Gas will clean up any mercury it finds. Customers should request to see a Peoples Gas employee badge from anyone seeking to perform an inspection.

Peoples Gas has already secured a number of electronic measurement devices, which are used to follow up on any potential visual sightings. As more such equipment becomes available, it will be used to perform all follow up inspections.

Next week, Peoples Gas will also begin inspecting approximately 1,800 locations where mercury-containing manometers were once installed. Manometers are pressure gauges used in a large volume installation when a customer receives elevated pressure. The company removed the last of these devices this year. These sites consist of large-volume gas consumers, such as industrial and commercial customers, factories, schools and hospitals. The company will also be examining its own facilities for the presence of mercury.

The company also disclosed that mercury was found while removing two mercury-containing manometers this month from Midwest Energy's Fisk Edison electric generating station at Cermak and Racine. Clean up of this site is underway.

Peoples Energy is a diversified energy company comprised of five primary business segments: Gas Distribution, Power Generation, Midstream Services, Retail Energy Services, and Oil and Gas Production. The Gas Distribution business serves about 1 million retail customers in Chicago and northeastern Illinois. Visit the Peoples Energy web site at [www.PeoplesEnergy.com](http://www.PeoplesEnergy.com)

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News

**Mercury costs rising for Nicor : Testing, clean-up tab alone could top \$20 million**

EDDIE BAEB and ALBY F. GALLUN

09/11/2000 Crain's Chicago Business Page 3

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The meter is running for Nicor Inc. as the gas utility faces clean-up costs, potential government fines and civil liability for bungling the removal of mercury-containing natural gas regulators from an as-yet-undetermined number of suburban homes.

Naperville-based Nicor says it's too soon to calculate a bill. The final tab won't be known until the company completes a lengthy process of testing homes and dump sites for mercury, cleaning up contamination and negotiating settlements or risking verdicts in lawsuits.

"This problem is still compounding itself, with the junkyards turning up contaminated-the whole thing is taking on a life of its own," says bond analyst John O'Connor at the Chicago office of Fitch Inc., who follows Nicor. "Who knows what the financial impact will be? With the possibility of class-action lawsuits, the end-game here is not clear."

But residential testing and cleanup alone could cost Nicor about \$20 million. That's a conservative figure, based on cost estimates from experts in such remediation work and the current rate at which Nicor is finding mercury contamination in the houses inspected so far.

The \$20-million figure doesn't include the costs of cleaning up sites where mercury-containing regulators may have been dumped, not to mention potential fines and civil damages. And it assumes that Nicor will be able to conduct the remediation on its own terms, using methods that some in the industry consider less thorough than more expensive techniques.

Even this baseline estimate represents 16% of the \$124.4 million that Nicor earned on \$1.62 billion in revenues last year. And with Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan pressing Nicor for fast action, the company may not be able to spread out the costs over a long period.

So far, shareholders haven't flinched. Nicor's shares were trading last week in the \$38 range, about where they were when news first broke that a Nicor subcontractor had spilled mercury in the process of moving



regulators from the interior of homes to the exterior.

That's likely to change as the costs come into focus.

"Near term, it creates some concern for investors, no doubt about it," says Donato Eassey, an equity analyst with Merrill Lynch, who nonetheless predicts the episode will have no "lingering impact" on Nicor stock.

The long-term effect on the stock will likely depend on the extent of the contamination and Nicor's ultimate liability for harm to consumers. So far, the company has found traces of mercury in 77 homes, about 5% of the 1,541 tested by late last week.

Nicor will test for mercury in 15,000 homes where mercury-containing regulators have been moved in the last five years. The company is testing with an air-sampling process that costs about \$60 per home, estimates an expert in residential mercury cleanups who asked not to be identified. At that rate, testing the first group of homes would cost about \$900,000.

Brian Arnold, an industrial hygienist with the Lombard office of Versar Inc. who has conducted residential mercury cleanups for Chicago-based gas utility Peoples Energy Corp., estimates the cost of cleaning homes found to have mercury contamination at about \$2,500 apiece. If 5%, or 750, of the first 15,000 houses are contaminated, Nicor would spend about \$1.9 million cleaning them. Post-clean-up testing by an outside firm-pegged at about \$1,000 per home by environmental engineer Paul Farber of P. Farber & Associates in Willowbrook-would add another \$750,000 to the total.

More costs to come

Then, Nicor must visually inspect another 185,000 homes that at some point have had mercury-containing regulators. Nicor says it will conduct air meter tests on all homes that have an internal mercury-containing regulator, or have had such a regulator replaced or moved outside. At homes where a mercury-containing regulator has always been outside, no test will be done.

Labor costs for the visual inspections are likely to run about \$40 per home, for a total of about \$7.4 million. If, as seems likely on the basis of industry experience, about 25% of the homes require testing, Nicor would need to perform the air test on 46,250 homes. At \$60 each, the testing cost would total about \$2.8 million.

If 5% of the second group of homes contains mercury, Nicor would have to clean up 2,312 houses at \$2,500 apiece, for a total of about \$5.8 million. Add to that post-testing costs that would reach \$2.3 million at \$1,000 per home.

Those rough estimates of testing and clean-up costs total \$21.8 million. Cleanup, however, is only part of the equation. Attorney General Ryan is seeking penalties under state environmental laws of \$50,000 per violation. If each improper regulator removal is deemed a separate violation, fines could run in the tens of millions.

Potential civil liabilities arising from the episode can only be guessed at. Already, two suits have been filed on behalf of suburban homeowners who were forced from their homes when traces of mercury were found there. One suit claims \$1 million in damages on behalf of a Park Ridge woman and seeks class-action status.

Harder to quantify, but as potentially damaging, is the public relations impact of the mercury scare. While electricity and phone companies commonly draw customers' ire, gas companies have generally been viewed as benign utilities. For Nicor, that's changing.

"It's scary; it creates a media frenzy. Yet there may or may not be serious health injuries," says Philip O'Connor of NewEnergy Midwest LLC. "This kind of stuff also creates a problem in dealing with regulators. Unrelated issues can be affected, because Nicor is going to get a different kind of attention paid to them now."

Nicor has another reason to worry about the stain on its brand name. Residentail competition is expected to come to the gas industry in Illinois within the next five years, meaning consumers will have the chance to choose another supplier at a time when the mercury spill is relatively fresh in their minds.

Costs could also rise if Nicor loses control of the testing and clean-up process, as some would prefer. Timothy Schuenke, city manager of Park Ridge, says several residents have told him they don't feel comfortable with Nicor workers conducting the screenings.

"One thing we've heard and keep hearing from people, 'We do not trust Nicor. We do not want Nicor to do the testing,' " says Mr. Schuenke. "People want independent verification."

Tests in question

Mr. Farber, a former Argonne National Laboratories specialist in industrial air pollution, questions Nicor's air sampling method. He says collecting samples, or "swipes," for laboratory analysis, which would cost about \$500 per home, is more thorough.

"The air test might miss mercury contamination in flooring or walls," says Mr. Farber. "I would advocate using a combination of both."

But the regulatory task force monitoring the cleanup has approved Nicor's methods. Brad Stimple, a U.S. Environmental Protection Agency expert in mercury cleanups who is a member of the task force, says the swipe method "doesn't make sense" and "would be a waste."

A Nicor spokesman declined to comment on cost estimates for the cleanup, saying, "You're not going to see numbers for a long time. There are a lot of costs and variables associated with this."

Photo Caption: Anybody but Nicor: Timothy Schuenke, city manager of Park Ridge, says residents there don't trust Nicor to test their homes for mercury contamination. Photo Credit: John R. Boehm

Chicago Tribune  
10-6-80

## **Voice of the people**

# **Dangers of dental mercury**

ORLAND PARK—The recent mercury contamination scare is just what the public needed to become aware of this poison substance. Its effects are cumulative, which means it can build up in the body with repeated exposure. Its effects can be devastating, and can cause kidney disease and respiratory and cardiac disorders. Mercury poisoning can also lead to symptoms such as anxiety, depression, confusion, irritability and the inability to concentrate.

Mercury poisoning can often go undetected for years because the symptoms do not necessarily reflect or suggest mercury as the initiating cause. Its symptoms can mimic those of many other disorders, such as multiple sclerosis, and can also produce allergic reactions with symptoms such as an itchy rash, eczema, headaches, asthma and digestive problems.

Mercury can bind to the DNA of cells, as well as to cell membranes, distorting them and interfering with normal cell function.

For years I have personally suffered with many similar symptoms. Because most of my medical tests have come back within normal limits, I began my own search for causes. One of my most surprising finds was in the field of biological dentistry. My research found that the so-called silver amalgams used for fillings can actually contain 50 percent mercury and only 25 percent silver. Many dental amalgam fillings can release mercury, tin, copper, silver and sometimes zinc into the body. Although any of these metals can be toxic, mercury appears the most harmful.

Mercury amalgams have been used in dentistry since the 1820s, yet it has been a recognized poison since the 1500s. It's unbelievable to think they are used today and remain in place, even though the Environmental Protection Agency

declared scrap dental amalgam a hazardous waste in 1988.

According to the Journal of the American Dental Association, dentists are instructed to "know the potential hazards and symptoms of mercury exposure, such as the development of sensitivity and neuropathy," and to be careful during handling of amalgams, and to store it under liquid, preferably glycerin or radiographic fixer solution in unbreakable, tightly sealed containers.

Dentist Richard Fischer of Annadale, Va., has said, "I can't throw it in the trash, bury it in the ground or put it in a landfill, but they say it's OK to put it in people's mouths. That doesn't make sense." It has been reported in scientific reviews that daily activities such as chewing and brushing can release mercury vapors, and the fillings' erosion with time only adds to their toxicity. There are some biological dentists and environmental medicine physicians who believe in removing all amalgams.

Other countries have responded to this data. Germans have prohibited the sale and manufacturing of amalgam since 1992, and in Sweden, the government has paid 50 percent of the cost of removal of amalgams.

Shouldn't American doctors and dentists be looking into the clinical implications of using toxic metals in the human body? Here in the U.S. we are told nothing of the risks these fillings have, yet people in the Chicago area know the impact Nicor Gas is receiving following the mercury spills found. If trace amounts in the home warrant such intense inspection and removal of this toxic substance, aren't we entitled to the same practice and level of care by those who use toxic metals in treatment?

Loree J. Kowalis, RN



## METRO

# City Hall blasts Peoples Gas

BY FRAN SPIELMAN  
CITY HALL REPORTER

Peoples Gas should not be allowed to hike home heating prices a whopping 64 percent simply because the company neglected to store enough natural gas last winter when prices were cheaper, a top mayoral aide said Wednesday.

City attorneys are exploring the possibility of petitioning the Illinois Commerce Commission to either block the increase or cap it on the grounds that "imprudent performance" by gas companies has left consumers in the lurch.

City Environment Commissioner Bill Abolt said there's "nothing beyond the control of the industry" to explain the exorbitant increase in home heating prices, unlike the situation with foreign oil.

"Why are the prices high—other than the fact that people didn't get their act together and pump last year because it wasn't that cold?"

Abolt said. "It's a matter that prices weren't high enough for them last year, so they didn't pump enough gas."

Peoples Gas spokesman Luis Diaz-Perez said several factors made it difficult to plan ahead.

Federal rules limit how long natural gas can be stored, and the "geology of gas storage facilities" does not allow for long-term storage of natural gas, Diaz-Perez said.

"We work with multiple suppliers to find customers the best price we can. And the price we pay for gas is the same price customers pay," Diaz-Perez said.

Sometime after the first of the year, Peoples Gas will go through its annual "reconciliation process" with the ICC, giving the city an opening to make its case, ICC spokesman David Farrell said.

"It's a process where the company shows what it spent for natural gas and is subject to a prudence review by the ICC," Farrell said.

October 05, 2000

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Home Delivery**Nicor now says bills will nearly double**

By Mike Comerford Daily Herald Business Writer

Posted on October 05, 2000

Prepare yourselves - natural gas bills this winter could cause indigestion.

The biggest provider in the suburbs, Naperville-based Nicor Inc., this week raised its bill estimate. It now says the average bill for this heating season is likely to be 90 percent higher than last year if we have an average winter. In Chicago, Peoples Energy Corp. also revised its numbers. It estimates a 64 percent increase.

That means that a Nicor customer who paid \$410 between October and March last winter will pay \$780 this winter if it turns out to be a typical Chicago winter. The average Peoples customer is likely to pay \$1,080 for that period.

October bills foreshadow these hikes. Nicor's average bill will be \$68; last year it was \$46. Last year's rate of 37 cents per therm has risen to 63 cents this month.

A severe winter season could result in higher prices and higher usage.

"There is just no way customers could have prepared themselves for these kind of numbers," said Patricia Clark, associate director of the Citizens Utility Board, a consumer watchdog group. "It will create a lot of hardships for a lot of people."

The utilities have been warning of higher winter bills since May, but the original estimates varied between 20 percent and 50 percent hikes. This week's revisions up the ante.

The dramatic change in estimates comes as the price of gas at the well has more than doubled. What cost Nicor \$2.44 per million British thermal units in January cost \$5.45 in October.

"Prices have been marching up relentlessly," said Ted Lenart, Nicor's vice president of supply ventures.

The American Gas Association said Wednesday that bills across the country are going up 20 percent to 50 percent but the increase is more dramatic in the Midwest, where usage is heavier. Nicor officials said that the price hike is due to national prices and has nothing to do with recent costs related to its mercury cleanup project.

The big jump is attributed to a combination of factors. Industry analysts say the last three winters have been mild, holding down demand and pushing down prices. The mild winters also translated into smaller profits for drilling companies, which began closing wells, contributing to a drop in supply.

With the growing economy, the gas industry found it was low on inventories, setting off a supply-and-demand price spiral, according to

David Parker, president of the American Gas Association.

The jump in prices hits Nicor from three directions: customers begin to conserve more, credit problems increase and gas it uses to power its distribution network goes up in price. Those costs squeeze its margin, about 20 percent of a customer's bill, because utilities in Illinois can't tack on profit to the cost of the gas.

Both Nicor and Peoples are including written explanations for the likely price hikes along with this month's bills, encouraging customers to sign up for monthly payment plans that spread payments on high winter bills through the year.

Gas drilling companies are rushing to fill the void. The number of rigs across the country has doubled this year. But with supplies 14 percent lower than a year ago, more gas isn't likely to arrive in time to help this winter.

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*Daily Herald 10/4/00*  
**Nicor, so far, finds mercury in less than 1 percent of homes**

Associated Press

A Nicor Gas official told state regulators Tuesday that the utility has inspected more than 54,000 homes in its probe of possible mercury contamination and has found traces of the poisonous substance in only 454.

The utility already has cleaned up mercury from more than 260 of the affected homes, Philip Cali, Nicor's executive vice president of operations said at a hearing before the Illinois Commerce Commission's Gas Policy Committee.

By Nov. 15, Nicor hopes to have screened all 250,000 homes that may have old gas meters that use mercury regulators or that had the meters improperly removed.

Cali could not estimate the cost of the program but said Nicor didn't plan to ask for a rate increase to pay for it.

Cali also said he knew of only five individuals who have claimed they had traces of mercury in their bodies from the contamination, including two who filed lawsuits against the company.

In a telephone interview later,

Tom Schafer, spokesman for the Illinois Department of Public Health, said that unofficially he has heard of only three people who have tested positive for very low traces of mercury.

"Officially, 500 people have been tested at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge and not one has had an elevated mercury count," Schafer said.

Officials of Peoples Energy and Mid-American Energy companies also testified at the ICC hearing about their own mercury recovery programs.

*CHICAGO SUN TIMES 10/4/00*  
**Mercury tally**

Nicor Gas said Tuesday it's found mercury in 454 of 20,000 homes it has inspected and will visit every home it suspects may have had a mercury spill by Nov. 15. Nicor Executive Vice President Phil Cali told the Illinois Commerce Commission on Tuesday that, in most cases, only "minor cleanup" was needed. Nicor and Peoples Gas representatives said they do not plan to raise rates to cover clean-up costs. Cali would not say how much Nicor expects to spend on the cleanup, except that it will "certainly" be more than \$1 million. Peoples said it has conducted 23,919 inspections in the city of Chicago and found about 20 cases of mercury spills. North Shore Gas has found mercury in seven homes out of 8,232 inspections.

**Mercury home spills  
spark new lawsuits**

*Daily Herald 10/4/00*  
Lawsuits are stacking up against Nicor Gas Co., despite progress the company has made in cleaning up the widespread mercury contamination in northern Illinois that was discovered in July.

At a weekly status hearing Tuesday in Cook County court, lawyers revealed that seven more lawsuits have been filed against the gas company since early last month — all on the heels of a lawsuit announced by the attorney general's office Sept. 5.

At the same time, the attorney general's office reported Nicor has made progress in cleaning up a Chicago Heights scrap yard that was the worst of four yards identified last week as being contaminated.



October 04, 2000

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Daily Herald Reports

Posted on October 04, 2000

**Nicor's nightmare**

Nicor, the nation's fifth largest natural gas distributor, serves 1.9 million customers in Illinois, excluding the city of Chicago.

Recent headlines tell of suburban homes having been plagued with mysterious health problems, allegedly due to negligence by Nicor. Some homes have potentially hazardous mercury vapors that allegedly harm pregnant women, young children and others who come in contact with it. This has brought untold ridicule and embarrassment to Nicor.

Environmental authorities question the method of removing regulators from homes. There has been dumping of faulty regulators in scrap yards or other sites without permission, which has angered local residents and public officials. Private homes have literally been torn apart because of this fiasco.

This problem has presented Nicor with a terrible nightmare. It is a frightening wake-up call when a primary source of service to the community, and a source that depends on the community for its revenue, allegedly is at fault.

With numerous homes on the inspection list, some residents must vacate their homes so as to have the mercury content removed, all at Nicor's expense.

Patience by homeowners during this ongoing problem is at a premium. Little if any notification or warning about this problem was given or made clear.

In the past, Nicor was acknowledged as a reputable, safe and dependable public service. To recover from this dark cloud of suspicion, the management needs to review the work rules and redirect or emphasize the importance of customer satisfaction as "the" reason for the company's existence.

There must be "zero tolerance" when matters of safety and dependability are at hand. Customer satisfaction must be adhered to. Just as Ford Motor Company and Bridgestone/Firestone Inc. humbled themselves in the face of disgrace, Nicor needs to re-establish a bond of trust with the public, so as to continue to serve the public.

Richard J. White

Elmhurst

**High-speed rail needed**

A study showing cancer risk from toxic pollutants spewed by aircraft extending for miles around O'Hare Airport is another reason to expand mass-transit rail systems. High-speed rail, which has been operating for

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Tribune 10-4-00

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### TO OUR CUSTOMERS:

As you may know, it was recently discovered that mercury contained in old-style gas regulators has been spilled in some homes and other sites in our service area. We've been working diligently to identify and clean up these locations. Although the number of customers likely to experience this problem is limited, we deeply regret the impact on those affected. We are committed to finding and cleaning up the mercury.

This has been a difficult learning period for us. We realize that our early understanding of the scope of this issue and our subsequent response were insufficient. While we have always communicated the facts as we became aware of them, we acknowledge and share our customers' disappointment and concern.

Today, we clearly recognize the challenge before us. It is a time for action. I want to assure all of our customers that we have mobilized aggressively—in every way and with every possible resource. We have put a large response force in the field, working long days to finish this task as quickly as possible.

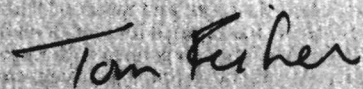


Our customers' safety, comfort, and peace-of-mind are the primary focus of every Nicor employee. In fact, hundreds of our own people, as well as many of our retirees, are staffing added phone lines and visiting thousands of homes each day, helping to resolve this situation as quickly—and as safely—as possible. While we sincerely regret the inconvenience to our customers, we are determined to ensure them a healthy, safe environment.

For more information, see our daily updates at [www.nicor.com](http://www.nicor.com). If you have questions or concerns, please call us at 1-888-288-8110.

As chief executive, I will make certain that this job is done right and that appropriate measures are taken to avoid the problem in the future. Your continued trust is vital to us.

Thank you.



Tom Fisher

Chairman, President and CEO  
Nicor Gas



The Nicor logo features the word "nicor" in a lowercase, serif font. Above the letters is a horizontal line with a small circle at its center, resembling a stylized arc or a gas valve symbol.

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Sunday, October 1, 2000

The Detroit News

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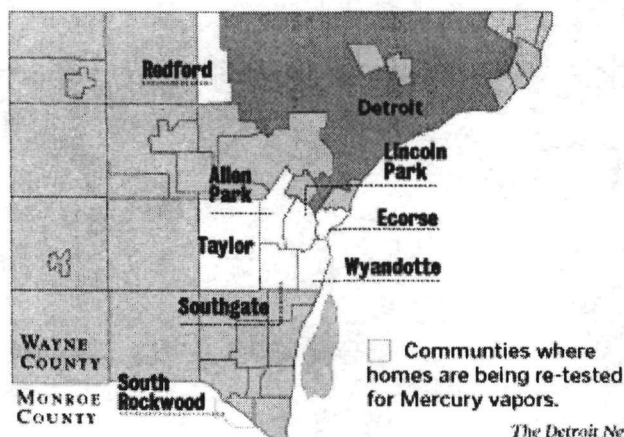
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## Utility retests Allen Park homes for mercury

MichCon says vapors were released in '90s, but new equipment is double-checking sites



The Detroit News

By Maureen Feighan / The Detroit News

**ALLEN PARK** -- Using new, more sensitive equipment, MichCon is retesting where mercury vapors were accidentally released during the 1990s.

The homes, concentrated in Detroit's southwest suburbs where the older meters already have been tested and cleaned once. They are being retested with the new as a precaution, said Amy Messano, MichCon's spokeswoman.

"It's nothing for people to panic about or be scared about," Messano said. "It's a precautionary program and we just want to give our customers piece of mind."

Still, residents in at least one Allen Park neighborhood where a home was tested are slightly concerned.

Richard Lake, who lives on Meyer in Allen Park, said workers from a Detroit cleanup firm spent at least two hours at a neighbor's house Thursday night -- wear protective footwear -- before returning again Friday morning.

Lake said it's not the possible presence of mercury that bothers him but the fact neighbors are being "left in the dark."

Messano wouldn't disclose whether or not additional cleanup was required at the Meyer Avenue for confidentiality reasons.

"They were definitely cleaning up," Lake said. "They had these sniffer things. concerns me is them doing these tests and not telling people about it."

Thirty-five homes were accidentally contaminated between 1990 and 2000 when workers replaced regulators containing small amount of mercury. Regulators are used to measure the flow of gas flowing into residential meters.

The meters were installed between 1936 and 1950. However, Messano said that means all older meters are unsafe. The spills only occurred when the regulators were changed, she said.

With the oversight of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, MichCon started contacting affected homeowners this week to conduct the additional testing.

Messano said the tests take more than eight hours to conduct. Workers start with



agreement to the  
Terms of Service  
(updated April 17,  
2000).

that gives an instant read and then set up air pumps which run for roughly eight h  
anything in the air.

Messano said the newer equipment detects lower levels of mercury but MichCo  
expect to come across any major findings.

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October 03, 2000

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Home Delivery**Nicor expands mercury check to 500 Elk Grove Village houses**

By Ames Boykin Daily Herald Staff Writer

Posted on October 03, 2000

Nicor will begin checking nearly 500 Elk Grove Village homes within a week to determine whether they used old-style natural gas meters.

Employees with the Naperville-based company will survey gas meters outside 481 homes built before 1961, Nicor officials said Monday.

Many of the homes east of Elk Grove Boulevard will likely be checked, Village President Craig B. Johnson said.

If Nicor employees do find the home had a mercury regulator and that it was moved, they will inform the homeowner and village in writing before asking to search inside, Johnson said.

Mercury that spilled from gas regulators first became an issue in July. As of Monday, mercury has been detected in 454 of the 54,388 homes that have been checked, according to Nicor.

Nicor says two-thirds of homes across Northern Illinois never had a mercury gas regulator. About 248,000 homes in the area are slated to be checked for possible mercury contamination by next month.

For more information on Nicor's screening program, call (888) 288-8110 or check the utility's Web site at [www.nicor.com](http://www.nicor.com).

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## ▲ News

# More mercury contamination found

## Nicor to inspect 1,000 homes

*Monday, October 2, 2000*

**By Ed Pilolla**  
*Special to the Daily Southtown*

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Three more Tinley Park homes have been found to be contaminated with mercury, prompting Nicor to schedule inspections for 1,000 homes in the village.

On Friday, Nicor officials informed Mayor Ed Zabrocki and village officials that the three Parkside subdivision homes will be cleaned as soon as possible.

The mayor also said Nicor crews will visually inspect the exteriors of 1,000 homes east of Harlem Avenue, though gas company officials could not confirm when the inspections will begin.

If inspectors discover that a house's original gas regulator has been moved, they will notify the homeowner and schedule a thorough interior inspection, Zabrocki said.

"Nicor has been extremely cooperative with us. They're seeming to bend over backward," Zabrocki said.

Last month, a family had to be evacuated from their home in the Parkside subdivision after it was found to be contaminated with mercury.

But only one of the three homes where mercury contamination was discovered last week must be evacuated. Nicor officials said the homeowner's work schedule conflicts with its daytime cleanup, Zabrocki said.

Zabrocki has spoken with one of the three families whose home was found with high levels of mercury last week. They said Nicor approved their being tested for mercury levels by doctors.

Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte could not confirm whether mercury was detected in the



homes, nor could he confirm how many homes are currently being inspected in Tinley Park due to the large number of homes being checked.

"We want to maintain privacy for our customers," Whyte said.

Zabrocki said the homes are on Hubbard Lane, Pine Point Drive and Elm Lane.

Whyte said Nicor has checked 44,777 homes in more than 200 communities for mercury, and 406 have tested positive.

"We are finding the problems are only in 1 percent of the homes we are checking," he said.

Mercury contamination problems stem from relocated original gas regulators in homes built before 1961, Whyte said. Homes built after that year do not have mercury regulators, he said.

Cleanup typically takes a few days or less, Whyte said.

"It depends on the configuration of the gas system in the area. There really is no one concentration area," he said, adding that Nicor officials notify the local municipality if any homes are found to be contaminated with mercury.

Also last week, a home in Midlothian was found by Nicor inspectors to be contaminated with mercury.



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## ▲ News

## Southeast

# Number of tainted homes uncertain

## Nicor officials continue tests

*Sunday, October 1, 2000*

**By Phil Rockrohr**  
*Special to the Daily Southtown*

Nicor is finishing the second phase of inspecting homes in Lansing, but officials are unable to say exactly how many have tested positive for traces of mercury, a company spokesman said Friday.

The second phase involves inspecting some 19,000 homes Nicor services from which old-style regulators were removed between 1990 and 1994, said Craig White, spokesman for Nicor.

"We're wrapping up phase two," White said. "There's just a few houses left. We're working through each of the communities systematically to finish the project."

White said he was not certain how many Lansing homes are among the 19,000 homes.

More than 300 Lansing residences were among the 200,000 inspected during the first phase, which began in Lansing exactly one month ago, according to Dorothy Odell Foster, regional community relations director.

On Sept. 12, Foster confirmed some homes in Lansing tested positive for traces of mercury at sites where old-style regulators were removed.

However, on Friday White said he did not know how many homes had tested positive.

"We're talking about 230 communities (we're inspecting)," White said. "It's virtually impossible to keep individual statistics on each town."

Nonetheless, Nicor has informed municipal leaders in those towns of which homes are contaminated, he said.

"We just can't issue press releases on it, for the privacy of our customers," White said.

The first phase of the inspections covered homes from which the regulators were removed between 1995 and 2000 and homes that still contained the regulators, officials said.

The inspections include a visual inspection in which Nicor crews determine whether an old-style regulator was previously or is still located inside a house, Foster explained in a letter to Lansing Mayor Robert West.

"If not, the home will not require further inspection," she said. "If visible traces of mercury are detected, clean-up crews will be scheduled for follow-up."

At the time the inspections were announced, West promised the village Lansing officials "will do whatever it takes to make sure that these home are inspected as quickly as possible."

"Whatever action is necessary to ensure the safety of our community will be taken," he said.



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## People's Energy to inspect homes for mercury

BY KENNETH L. R. PATCHEN

STAFF WRITER

Highland Park and Deerfield homes built before 1965 will be inspected by People's Energy for the presence of mercury starting in early October.

Mercury was used in gas pressure regulators removed from area homes before 1965. "Just to be sure, they're going to inspect 55,000 homes in their service area," said Mayor Daniel M. Pierce.

According to the Northeastern Illinois Planning Commission, there were 7,384 dwelling units in Highland Park in 1960, a combination of apartments, single family units, and condominiums. According to Peoples Energy, those are the homes to be checked. In 1990, the census counted 11,436 units.

Pierce and County Board member Carol Spielman, D-22nd, were notified of the inspection Program Sept. 21 by North Shore Gas, owner of subsidiary Peoples Energy. "I was very pleased they are going to inspect all houses in Highland Park free of charge," Pierce said. "They'll send a letter to all the people."

As an extra caution, Highland Park City Council members voted Monday night to postpone consideration of an ordinance to grant a non-exclusive franchise to North Shore Gas Company. Pierce said the action was a pre-caution to keep the mercury issue "on the front burner."

"No one need be concerned," Pierce told the council. "No one's reported mercury in Highland Park in our area."

The council will consider the ordinance at its next meeting.

Spielman said Deerfield and Highland Park were well represented at the Sept. 21 meeting with North Shore Gas.

Spielman and Village of Deerfield Assistant Manger Diane Mikula asked North Shore Gas to provide addresses of homes to be inspected to Deerfield and Highland Park. This was done in anticipation of telephone calls by local residents.

North Shore Gas employees will perform a visual inspection. If the possible presence of mercury is found, employees with sensitive mercury analyzers will inspect the home the same day. Peoples Gas said "in addition to the visual inspection, every location also will be inspected with a mercury analyzer in the coming weeks."

Spielman said all schools in the service area will be inspected, including pre-schools and nursery schools. She said those locations will be among the first to be inspected.

Chief Executive Officer of Peoples Energy Richard E. Terry said, "The inspection program was not triggered by the discovery of any mercury in the North Shore Gas service area. Rather, it is a commitment to the safety of customers."

Pierce said most homes affected by the inspection program are on the east side of Highland Park. Gas regulators were removed from those homes in the 1950s and 1960s.

Customers not home when inspectors arrive will be left English/Spanish language instructions to arrange another inspection. The toll free customer hot-line for questions is 1-877-891-1174. Information is available at [www.PeoplesEnergy.com](http://www.PeoplesEnergy.com).

## Gas company finds mercury at homes

BY ALAN SCHMIDT  
STAFF WRITER

Since it began inspections of almost 30,000 homes in Chicago for the presence of mercury on Sept. 15, Peoples Gas reported it had found the substance in 13 homes as of Monday — seven of them on the Northwest Side.

The inspections began in response to a small amount of mercury that was found Sept. 13 in a home in the Mount Greenwood neighborhood on the Far Southwest Side. Mount Greenwood is one of three parts of Chicago where homes once had regulators to reduce the pressure of gas coming in from outside lines.

City inspectors were dispatched to the house and confirmed that the substance was mercury. The inspectors then called the United States Environmental Protection Agency.

The utility had previously conducted random checks in Mount Greenwood as a precaution in light of Nicor's problems and gave itself a clean bill of health, said city Department of the Environment spokeswoman Jessica Rio.

In addition to the Mount Greenwood neighborhood, Peoples Gas has conducted inspections in the Clearing neighborhood on the South Side and in three areas on the Far Northwest Side.

"Minute" amounts of mercury were found in four homes in the Edison Park neighborhood — including two this past Saturday — and mercury turned up in three homes in an area that includes the Edgebrook and Gladstone Park neighborhoods.

No mercury was found in a third area which includes Oriole Park and parts of the Northwest Cumberland area.

Visual inspections were conducted in 21,278 homes as of Monday, said Peoples Gas spokesman Luis Diaz-Perez. In cases where mercury is found, a second inspection is conducted right away to check for mercury vapors in the air and the substance is cleaned up.

Once all visual inspections are done, Peoples Gas will follow up with a round of checks with detection equipment.

Residents can call a toll-free number — 1-877-891-1174 — for further information.

## Mercury inspections come to Lake County

BY MARLENE HUNT

STAFF WRITER

Inspections for mercury contamination began Saturday on the first of 55,000 Lake County homes scheduled for the special examination.

Visual inspections are planned for older homes in several townships, including Vernon, Elmhurst, Avon, Fremont, Deerfield, West Deerfield, Newport, Libertyville, Shields, and Warren Townships.

North Shore Gas, a subsidiary of Peoples Energy, met with community officials last week. They explained the inspection program involves homes where gas pressure regulators containing mercury were removed in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

State Senator Adeline Geo-Karis (R-31) of Zion, who is also village attorney for Vernon Hills, was among those at the meeting. Most of the targeted area falls within her senatorial district. She was advised Friday that the first inspections will take place in the Zion-Benton area.

"North Shore Gas should look into the problem. They may have to inspect manufacturing plants as well," she said. Geo-Karis was contacted by a man who worked at the former Johns Manville plant at the Waukegan lakefront. "He said there were many bottles of mercury there and he is really worried about the impact that may have on his health."

Grayslake Assistant Village Manager Chris Clark said the mercury inspection only pertains to homes built in the area prior to 1965.

Clark said older homes built south of Washington Street and east of Alleghany should be receiving letters in the mail within the next week telling residents when inspections will take place.

The inspections in the Grayslake area should begin in 6 to 8 weeks, Clark said.

"We are not anticipating problems from the inspection, but all of the older homes in the area should be inspected in case of any potential mercury problems," Clark said. "It's nice to see North Shore Gas taking the lead in the investigation and taking the extra steps to cover all of their bases."

Gurnee Assistant Village Manager Brad Burke added letters will be going out to 700 North Shore Gas customers in Gurnee who fall under the same criteria.

"It's mostly on the eastern part of town," Burke said. "The gas company told us they should be finished with the checks in 6-8 weeks, so I believe we are on the same proposed schedule as Grayslake."

Mike Flynn, assistant manager of Mundelein, said the village is unaware of the number of homes scheduled for the check. He points out that the inspection program does not involve assistance of the village.

"Our role is primarily to be a communications point so that if our residents have questions we can tell them who to contact. We understand that letters are to be sent out next week. We understand the inspections are visual inspections to begin with, with re-testing if warranted."

"The inspection program was not triggered by the discovery of any mercury in the North Shore Gas service area," said Richard E. Terry, chairman and chief executive officer of North Shore Gas' parent company, Peoples Energy. "Rather, it is a commitment to the safety of customers."

North Shore Gas serves 54 communities in a 275-square-mile area of Northeastern Illinois. Its sister company, Chicago-based Peoples Gas, recently began the inspection of about 30,000 homes after a



small amount of mercury was found earlier in one Chicago home.

Peoples Energy spokesman Luis Diaz-Perez said the inspection process in the Chicago area found traces of mercury in about one home out of every 1,200 checked.

"In no case was mercury found at a level that required the relocation of residents. In each instance, Peoples Energy has cleaned up any mercury that has been found to United States Environmental Association-approved levels."

North Shore Gas will begin its inspections with a visual check for mercury. If those inspections reveal even the possible presence of mercury, Gas company employees equipped with sensitive mercury analyzers will be dispatched to the scene that day to conduct precise measurements. In addition to the visual inspection, every location will also be inspected with a mercury analyzer in the coming weeks.

The Company has a toll-free hot line (1-877-891-1174). For more information, including daily inspection statistics, visit the company website is [www.peoplesenergy.com](http://www.peoplesenergy.com).

# Local mercury inspections are planned

BY MARLENE HUNT  
STAFF WRITER

Inspections for mercury contamination began Saturday on the first of 55,000 Lake County homes scheduled for the special examination.

Visual inspections are planned for older homes and commercial establishments in both Lake Forest and Lake Bluff as well as several other areas on the north shore.

North Shore Gas, a subsidiary of Peoples Energy, met with community officials last week. They explained the inspection process involves homes where gas pressure regulators containing mercury were removed in the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s.

The exact dates of the inspections have yet to be determined, according to Assistant to the Lake Forest City Manager Rosemary Haack and Lake Bluff Village Administrator Kent Street.

"We've had some calls about it and we have referred them to the gas company," Haack said.

North Shore Gas customers who are not home when the inspector arrives will be left information in both English and Spanish on how to schedule an inspection. The Company has a toll-free hot line (1-877-891-1174). For more information, including daily inspection statistics, visit the company website is [www.peoplesenergy.com](http://www.peoplesenergy.com).

"The inspection program was not triggered by the discovery of any mercury in the North Shore Gas service area," said Richard E. Terry, chairman and chief executive officer of North Shore Gas' parent company, Peoples Energy. "Rather, it is a commitment to the safety of customers."

"North Shore Gas should look into the problem," State Senator Adeline Geo-Karis (R-31) of Zion said. "They may have to inspect manufacturing plants as well. I had a call from a man who worked at the former Johns Manville plant at the Waukegan lakefront. He said there were many bottles of mercury there and he is really worried about the impact that may have on his health."

North Shore gas serves 54 communities in a 275-square-mile area of Northeastern Illinois. Its sister company, Chicago-based Peoples Gas, last week began the inspection of approximately 30,000 homes after a small amount of mercury was found earlier in one Chicago home.

Peoples Energy spokesman Luis Diaz-Perez said the inspection process in the Chicago area found traces of mercury in approximately one home of every 1,200 checked.

"In no case was mercury found at a level that required the relocation of residents. In each instance, Peoples Energy has cleaned up any mercury that has been found to United States Environmental Association-approved levels."

North Shore Gas will begin its inspections with a visual check for mercury. If those inspections reveal even the possible presence of mercury, company employees equipped with sensitive mercury analyzers will be dispatched to the scene that day to conduct precise measurements. In addition to the visual inspection, every location will also be inspected with a mercury analyzer in the coming weeks.

When the Chicago inspection process was announced, Terry noted approximately 75 percent of the Peoples Gas distribution has always been low pressure. This means, he said, "customers in low-pressure areas never had regulators of any sort in their homes and businesses."



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## Chicago Heights Area

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## Nicor starts cleanup in Chicago Heights

Thursday, September 21, 2000

By Lisa Pevtzow  
Special to The Star

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As cleanup started Tuesday at Chicago Heights Iron and Supply Co., an industrial facility contaminated by mercury from old Nicor gas regulators, prosecutors for the Illinois Attorney General's office started poring over a pile of documents delivered by Nicor just minutes before its court-ordered deadline to provide detailed information on the extent of possible contamination elsewhere.

Last week, Circuit Court Judge Paul Biebel ordered Nicor to turn over all company records on transportation companies that hauled mercury or mercury regulators from Nicor service centers and where they were taken.

Also under the detailed preliminary injunction, Nicor was ordered to draw up a draft letter giving notice to homeowners from which mercury-filled regulators were removed between 1990 and 1994 to call the Illinois Department of Public Health:

- If the house contains children under age 5, pregnant women or women recently pregnant.
- If they spot droplets of mercury.
- If a resident shows symptoms of mercury exposure, which include tremors.

Lori Bolas, a spokeswoman for the attorney general, said Nicor appears to have turned over all the required information, but lawyers are reviewing the paperwork to make sure Nicor has complied fully with the judge's order.

Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte said the utility already has

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turned over a list to the state of 19,000 households where gas regulators were removed between six and 10 years ago. A letter to them should be going out this week, he said.

As part of the judge's order, Nicor was directed to expand its priority inspection list to include houses at risk of contamination between 1990 and 1994.

Earlier this month, in a move to force Nicor to speed up its identification of houses in which mercury may have been spilled when the basement regulators were pulled out, Attorney General Jim Ryan filed a five-count civil suit.

Whyte said Nicor will submit a work plan to clean up the affected homes today.

Whyte expected that by the middle of the week all 10 scrap yards and Nicor service centers where dirty regulators were discovered would be rid of mercury contamination. Nicor also is investigating whether any regulators may have been junked out of state, as a former truck driver from Worth has claimed.

As of Monday, Nicor had contacted 15,668 homes. Of those, 5,765 tested negative for mercury and 231 tested positive.

But Dennis McMurray, spokesman for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, said Nicor must reclean five facilities where mercury readings are still too high.

They are Good Samaritan Hospital in Downers Grove, Kimble Glass in Chicago Heights, Kropp Forge in Cicero, Crossfields Co. in Joliet and Dolton Aluminum Co. in Dolton.

At the Chicago Heights scrapyards, 1715 Wentworth Ave., a Nicor environmental contractor, overseen by EPA officials, separated regulators heavily contaminated by mercury from those with residual contamination and those free of mercury, said Mick Hans, a spokesman for the U.S. EPA.

The "hotter" pile will go to a special handling facility, and the rest will most likely be sent to a Michigan landfill.

Although some gas companies enclose regulators completely before disposing of them as hazardous waste, Nicor workers simply poured out the two or so teaspoonfuls of mercury before junking them.

"The procedures weren't as thorough as might have been," Hans said.

Hans said EPA officials and people from the Chicago Department of Environment sat down Tuesday to discuss how to handle mercury contamination caused by Peoples Gas' removal of old regulators.

Peoples Gas spokesman Luis Diaz-Perez said the utility is discovering minute amounts of mercury in one of every 1,000 homes it checks.

So far, eight homes in Chicago's Clearing and Mount Greenwood communities and on Chicago's Northwest Side have tested positive for mercury. All but one of them have been cleaned up, Diaz-Perez said.

Also, several droplets of mercury were found Tuesday in a utility building at Dyett Elementary, 525 E. 51st St., nowhere near where children are, Hans said.



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A cleanup crew from Ferguson-Harbour Inc. responds to a mercury spill in a Stickney alley. Eight fluid ounces was recovered.

Tribune photos by Carl Wagner



# Mercury spill sends chill through Stickney



The EPA's Charles Gebien (center) explains the cleanup effort to Ed Osowski (left) of the Illinois EPA, Stickney Fire Chief Larry Meyer and Stickney Mayor Don Tabor.

## Puddle found in an alley spurs worries

By Courtney Challos  
and Jeff Long

TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

Environmental officials screened four homes and the tires on as many as 50 vehicles near an alley in Stickney after a retired fire captain taking out his trash discovered a puddle of toxic mercury near the garbage can, officials said Thursday.

"I saw a big, silver spot in about a three-foot circle," said Frank Kratochvil, 60, who had been a captain with the Stickney Fire Department for 10 years. "I thought somebody sprayed silver paint."

But after closer investiga-

■ State asks Nicor for more cleanup data. **Page 5.**

tion, Kratochvil recognized the substance as mercury oozing into a groove in the pavement. Officials later calculated that eight fluid ounces of the substance had been spilled or discarded.

Widespread publicity over mercury cleanups underway in Chicago area homes that were contaminated during the removal of natural gas regulators has brought heightened awareness about the health

threat posed by the toxic substance, officials said.

While the attention has been on the regulators, health officials warn that there are many ways for people to be exposed to the dangerous substance in their homes, schools and even hospitals.

Stickney Mayor Donald Tabor said he received about 60 calls from residents concerned about health risks after the discovery in his village. The Illinois Department of Public Health answered questions people had at the scene Wednesday. The department planned to screen at least 18

SEE MERCURY, PAGE 2

# Mercury

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

more homes for mercury vapors Thursday.

People who walk through mercury can easily track it into their homes, where the substance evaporates at room temperature. But tests showed no contamination in the four homes screened.

No vehicles were contaminated either.

The Illinois Environmental Protection Agency and the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency are involved in the cleanup of the 600-foot alley between Harlem and Maple Avenues. The Federal Bureau of Investigation will investigate how the mercury got into the alley, Tabor said.

"People do have mercury in their homes that they might have had for years," warned Louise Fabinski, senior regional representative with the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, which works with the EPA and other environmental agencies.

There are countless examples of spills like the one in Stickney.

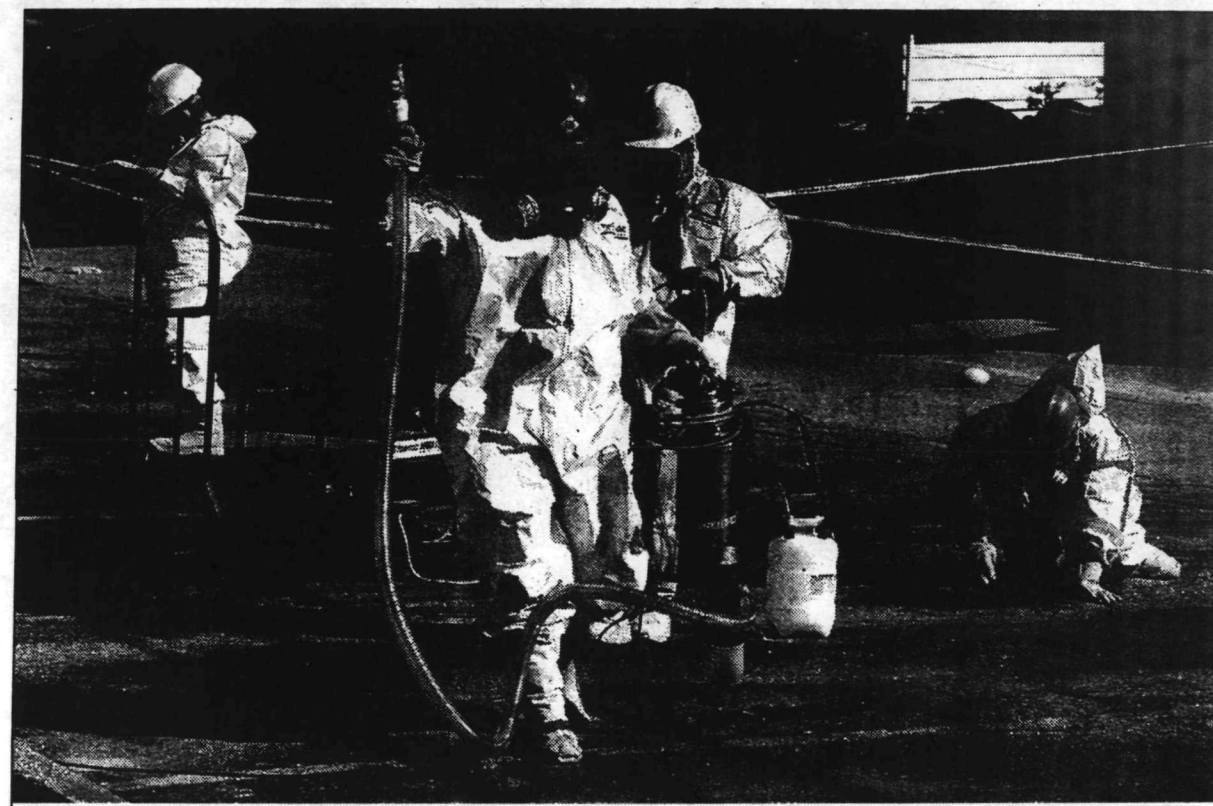
At an alternative school for pregnant girls in Chicago last December, a nurse was taking a student's blood pressure with a device that has mercury in it. It broke.

The accident spilled mercury on the nurse's clothes and, Fabinski said, exposed eight people to mercury for several hours.

Young children and fetuses are highly susceptible to the toxic effects of mercury. It can prevent the brain and nervous system from developing normally. Affected children show lowered intelligence, impaired hearing and poor coordination. Verbal and motor skills may be delayed.

The school accident didn't result in those symptoms showing up in anyone, Fabinski said.

Many incidents had the potential



Tribune photo by Carl Wagner

Members of a cleanup crew use a monitor, vacuum, chemicals and rags on a Stickney alley where mercury was found this week. The FBI will investigate how the mercury got into the alley.

to be much worse than they were.

The threat is compounded by the apparent fascination that many children and some adults have for liquid mercury, or "quicksilver," with its distinctive, metallic way of moving.

Fabinski's agency ranks mercury third on its Top 20 list of hazardous substances.

The list has arsenic and lead in the first and second positions. The rankings are based on a combination of how common a substance is, its toxicity and the potential for people to be exposed to it.

The University of Illinois at Chicago recently held the nation's first campus fever-thermometer

exchange. Students, faculty, staff and their families could trade in their mercury-containing thermometers for digital versions.

Scott Sederstrom, coordinator of the Sustainable Hospitals program that helped organize the exchange, said it had been planned for months. The publicity over the mercury spills at the homes of Nicor customers might have generated more interest, he said.

"It's just an unfortunate situation," said Sederstrom, referring to the Nicor investigation. "I hope it gets dealt with appropriately. But people are exposed to mercury every day."

Besides thermometers, mercury

might also be in older thermostats, light switches and fluorescent lights.

Fabinski recalled one case in August 1999 in which a teenager stole several ounces from a wall-mounted blood pressure device in a Chicago hospital. His girlfriend, who had just given birth, was staying in the room next door.

"He put it in a Styrofoam cup, and kept it in his girlfriend's closet overnight, then took it home," Fabinski said.

At home, he dipped some jewelry in the mercury and then took the mercury to a friend's house. The friend wound up in the hospital.

# State asks Nicor for more data on cleanup

By Jeff Long

TRIBUNE ENVIRONMENT WRITER

Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan's office is now generally satisfied with the effort by Nicor Gas to identify and clean homes contaminated with mercury, but prosecutors still want more details about the level of contamination in individual homes.

Prosecutors have asked for, and Nicor has agreed to provide, details about when specific homes were identified as being contaminated and how long it took to clean them.

Prosecutors and Nicor lawyers met with Cook County Circuit Judge Paul Biebel Jr. on Thursday to discuss progress of the mercury cleanup. So far, 33,532 of the more than 200,000 homes to be tested have been, and 358 showed signs of mercury contamination. Of those, 163 have been cleaned.

Visual inspections on all homes that might have had the old mercury-containing metering equipment is to be done by Nov. 15, and the air in all the homes is to be tested with sensitive "mercury-sniffing" instruments by Dec. 30.

Nicor has 135, five-member cleanup crews ready to clean homes that test positive for mercury.

"It's a tremendous undertaking," said Matthew Dunn, chief of the environmental division of the Ryan's office.

Prosecutors from Cook, DuPage and Will Counties have joined Ryan in a lawsuit to make sure Nicor and its contractors deal appropriately with the contamination.

Mercury has also been found in scrap yards, at Nicor service centers and at sites of larger, non-residential customers of the gas company. The cleanup of a Chicago Heights scrap yard has taken longer than expected, Dunn told Biebel.

Dunn added that mercury contamination was found at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge after a Nicor contractor declared it mercury-free. The site has since been cleaned.

Another 46 "sensitive" sites—such as other hospitals, schools and nursing homes—have been given a mercury-free bill of health by the state inspectors, Dunn and lawyers for Nicor told Biebel.

Chicago Tribune 9-29-00



## Voice of the people

# Cleaning up mercury spills

NAPERVILLE—This has been a challenging period for Nicor Gas and our customers.

As we have mobilized tremendous resources in recent weeks to address the possibility of mercury spills from old-style regulators, this has also been a period of learning—and of taking thoughtful action.

There is no question that it has taken us some time first to understand the full scope of this issue, and then to develop a comprehensive plan to resolve it.

Although we have shared the facts as we became aware of them, the people of Nicor understand and share your disappointment and your concern about the problems associated with the removal of old-style regulators.

We recognize the challenge before us, and we will continue to utilize every necessary resource to resolve this situation completely and thoroughly. Nicor is committed to providing reliable, safe service to our customers and the communities we serve.

Therefore we have been and will continue to be resolute in identifying possible mercury spills and getting them cleaned up as quickly as possible.

We have reached out nationally to obtain equipment and personnel from New Jersey to California to guarantee a massive mercury response force on the ground.

We have hundreds of people in the field both to conduct our investigation and to respond as

quickly as possible to any situation we encounter.

Nicor has also enlisted the assistance of health and environmental experts to guide our actions in this unprecedented challenge, and we're confident that we are doing the right things.

From the beginning, Nicor has maintained an expansive Web site ([www.nicor.com](http://www.nicor.com)) with daily updates to provide information and resources to our customers and our community.

We are acutely aware that the inspections and cleanup work have been disruptive.

We take some comfort that these disruptions will ensure a healthy, safe environment and provide our customers with the piece of mind they deserve.

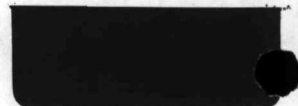
That, however, does not make the disruptions and resulting hard feelings immediately disappear. We know that.

Rebuilding our relationships with both our customers and our communities is vitally important to us. We're also confident that in the long run Nicor will be judged by our response and our performance, and we hope that our communities will afford us the opportunity to restore the trust we have worked so hard over the last five decades to earn.

Please be assured that Nicor will get this job done—and done right.

**Tom Fisher**

Chairman, president and CEO  
Nicor Gas



## METRO

# Nicor, state move up inspection deadline

BY CHRIS FUSCO  
SUBURBAN REPORTER

Satisfying the state's request for a mercury cleanup plan with a deadline, Nicor Gas agreed Thursday to inspect 250,000 potentially affected homes by year's end.

The Dec. 30 deadline was a subject of debate since Nicor gave the plan to Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan's mercury task force last week. The 6-inch-thick document didn't include the deadline, but Nicor attorneys added it this week.

Although the plan shaves only two months off a Nicor estimate that Ryan called unacceptable, the state is satisfied. Nicor has shown it is acting to screen and clean the homes that could be affected, said Matthew J. Dunn, assistant attorney general.

The state sued the Naperville company Sept. 5, claiming it or its contractors botched removal of gas meters, causing mercury to spill.

Nicor will inspect homes of all customers by Nov. 15 to see if they ever had mercury-filled regulators. If inspectors need to get inside but can't, they will leave door tags and

follow up with letters and phone calls.

The company also is increasing its crews for inspection and cleaning. As of Monday, it will have 413 inspectors working on the problem.

In addition, 135 work crews will be available to clean up contaminated homes.

Initial cleanups of mercury spills took several weeks. But John Berghoff, an attorney representing Nicor, said the length has since dwindled to a day on average.

Nicor has detected mercury at 384 suburban homes, and more than 160 have been cleaned. Out of 40,430 homes on its list, Nicor hasn't been able to get inside about one-third, Dunn said.

Besides Nicor, Peoples Gas has found mercury at 16 of 22,739 Chicago homes checked for mercury. North Shore Gas has detected mercury at five of 4,995.

State and federal inspectors believe a mercury spill discovered in Stickney this week was unrelated. In that case, about 8 ounces of mercury was spilled in an alley and spread through a neighborhood by cars.

# Nicor's response praised

*Southern*  
Attorney general commends cleanup

By Terry Evans  
Medill News Service

9/29/00

Nicor Gas is cleaning up more than mercury contamination. It's apparently cleaning up its act, and the Illinois attorney general's office has taken notice.

Recent criticism of Nicor Gas' handling of the widespread problem quickly turned to praise Thursday during a court hearing.

Lawyers from Attorney General Jim Ryan's office commended Nicor for being "extremely" cooperative in its stepped-up efforts to handle the company's widespread mercury contamination.

Assistant Attorney General Matthew Dunn reported on the progress made in cleaning up contaminated homes, non-residential sites, Nicor service centers and scrap yards.

The first sign of mercury contamination was discovered in a Mount Prospect home in July. That initial discovery would later become the thread to unravel a widespread contamination problem — one that is estimated to affect 200,000 homes and more than a dozen non-residential sites.

As of Wednesday, Nicor inspectors had conducted visual inspections of 33,532 homes. Mercury contamination was found in 358 of them. Nearly half have been cleaned up, and officials are in the process of handling the rest.

In the non-residential sites — including hospitals, schools and nursing homes — 254 potentially contaminated sites have been identified.

Mercury contamination was found and cleaned up in 11 of those facilities, Dunn said.

Of the 27 scrap yards screened for potential contamination, four tested positive for mercury, including a Chicago Heights center that had the worst contamination.

"The problem is bigger than anticipated at Chicago Heights," Dunn said.

Inspectors discovered more than 400 mercury regulators at that site. They also screened 30 Nicor service centers and discovered contamination in seven.

# Lawmaker wants Nicor guarantee

## Mercury scare prompts legislation proposal

By MICK ZAWISLAK  
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Nicor again faced state prosecutors in court Thursday regarding its mercury screening and cleanup program, and also was targeted by a Park Ridge legislator who plans to introduce a new law to prevent similar problems in the future.

State Sen. Dave Sullivan, a Park Ridge Republican, said contractors who remove meters for any natural gas utilities should be subject to a background check for safety violations as part of a three-pronged attempt to avoid errors that have resulted in mercury spills that have forced some residents from their homes.

"There are families who are frightened in these communities. They're scared and they have reasons to be scared. Nicor has made mistakes," Sullivan said at a news conference in the driveway of a Park Ridge family whose former home was contaminated.

Sullivan said he also would recommend that Nicor and other natural gas utilities test each home in which a meter is moved in the

future within a week of that work and notify residents of what was done.

Failure to do so would invoke a fine of \$50,000 (to be doubled for a second violation) plus \$20,000 per day the violation continued, according to Sullivan.

"This problem is Nicor's responsibility and it's their responsibility to make sure this won't happen again," he said.

In a status hearing in Cook County circuit court, Nicor outlined the progress it has made in testing 248,000 homes, 254 non-residential sites, 27 scrap yards and 30 company service centers.

The focus has been on homes where meters had been removed anytime since 1990 but as many as 170,000 homeowners precede that date and have not been notified by Nicor.

"We are now discussing how to target and send out those notification letters," said Lori Bolas, spokesperson for Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan.

Traces of mercury were found in seven service centers, 11 of the non-residential buildings, and four

scrap yards. Cleanup is either complete or under way in those locations.

Visual inspections in all the homes will be completed by Nov. 15 and all homes will be inspected using a special vapor-identifying meter by Dec. 30.

To date, traces of mercury have been found in 358 of the 33,532 homes visited by Nicor and 163 of those have been cleaned, the company said.

It also said it could not get into a third of those homes but also reported that 12,265 never had old-style meters containing mercury.

Nicor told the court it will be sending out 413 field inspectors (145 with the special mercury sensing equipment). The company also said clean up in any home would be scheduled within 48 hours if mercury is detected.

The appearance was the first since the company agreed to a court order sought by Ryan and states attorneys from Cook and DuPage counties. Will County also





**Marcelaine Zimmermann of Park Ridge plays with 3-year-old daughter Caroline in the driveway of their home. The Zimmermann's former home nearby was contaminated after mercury was spilled when a gas meter was replaced.**

Daily Herald Photo/Mark Black

joined the suit Thursday.

Ryan had argued Nicor wasn't providing information nor acting quickly enough to identify and solve problems regarding potential mercury contamination since it was first identified about two months ago.

Bolas said Ryan was "pleased" with the most recent schedule, particularly considering the scarcity of the Jerome meters used to check for mercury vapors.

In Park Ridge, however, Sullivan was looking ahead.

Sullivan, an aide in Gov. George Ryan's gubernatorial campaign, was appointed to the seat in 1998

and is running for election next month. He acknowledged the legislation likely would not be considered until January. The General Assembly is out of session and returns next month for a veto session prior to new business. He deflected the idea that his announcement was timed for the election.

Sullivan said the responsibility for administering the new law would fall to the Illinois Commerce Commission, which currently regulates utilities. The ICC also would be required to investigate the background of contractors to determine if they have safety violations on

their records, according to Sullivan.

"This is the first I've heard of it," said ICC Spokesman David Farrell. "We stand ready if the General Assembly directs us to do something."

Sullivan's opponent, Phil Pritzker, a Democrat from Arlington Heights, questioned whether requiring the ICC to conduct background checks would release utilities from accountability, adding the proper legal checks on safety violations already are in place.

Daily Herald staff writer Ames Boykin contributed to this report.

Chicago Tribune

9-28-80

## Metropolitan briefing

### ILLINOIS

## Mercury alert goes beyond Chicago area

Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan's office is trying to find out if mercury contamination goes beyond Chicago and its suburbs to the customers of other gas utilities around the state.

Ryan's office has sent letters to about 100 natural-gas utilities and communities that might have used mercury-containing gas regulators similar to the ones that have spurred the inspection of more than 300,000 homes in northeast Illinois.

"We're making them aware of what's going on in Chicago, if they don't already know," said Lori Bolas, a spokeswoman for the attorney general.

The attorney general has asked for responses by Friday.

Inspections of more than 300,000 homes are under way in the Chicago area by Nicor Gas, Peoples Gas and North Shore Gas.

Mercury has been found in the homes of at least 348 customers of those companies, including 328 for Nicor Gas, 15 for Peoples Gas and 5 for North Shore Gas. The attorney general asked other utilities around the state whether they had or removed the old-style regulators and for copies of their procedures in doing so.

September 28, 2000

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Home Delivery**Natural gas line rupture at new school wasn't the first**

By Heather Cunningham Daily Herald Correspondent

Posted on September 28, 2000

Students were evacuated from the new St. Charles North High School's academic wing for nearly 90 minutes last week when building contractors ruptured a Nicor gas line during construction on the campus.

"We will be reviewing the incident to make sure that everyone involved knows where gas lines exist," Superintendent Fran Kostel said. "Hopefully this will prevent problems like this from occurring in the future."

Apparently it's already happened at least twice. At a school board meeting this week, board member Steve Cole was furious about Friday's gas line rupture -indicating that it wasn't the first time that gas lines had been disturbed by mistake in recent weeks.

"Three weeks ago our building contractors hit a secondary gas line along Red Gate Road," Cole said. "One time is one time too many. Two times and the guy upstairs is telling people that they better get their act together because kids could be in harm's way here."

"Doesn't anyone know about JULIE around here?" Cole said. "I didn't, but apparently if you are in construction you know to call Nicor to see if there are any gas lines where you are going to dig before you do so."

JULIE, or Joint Utility Locating In Excavation is a cooperative service offered by the various utilities.

"In the future, I suggest that we are very clear to those working on our grounds to make sure that JULIE is helping us," Cole said.

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## **Response to Nicor Residential Mercury Releases**

Nicor Gas (Nicor) continues to screen potentially contaminated homes within their service area and is performing decontamination of those homes found to be contaminated. Nicor has announced that they will screen all homes within their service area where a mercury gas regulator may currently exist or may have been previously removed from the homes interior over the course of several decades.

To date, approximately 1,700 homes have been screened and 75 identified as requiring decontamination. Approximately 27 homes have been successfully decontaminated and approved by ATSDR and U.S. EPA for re-occupancy. U.S. EPA continues to monitor the residential cleanup activities to ensure that established protocols are being adequately followed.

As the evidence of improper handling of mercury mounted, U.S. EPA, IEPA and the AGO required Nicor to expand its investigation. Specifically, Nicor was directed to investigate the Nicor service centers where regulators were taken after removal from residences, and to investigate scrap yards where the regulators were taken after processing.

On 9/2/00, U.S. EPA and IEPA began joint inspections of scrap yards identified by Nicor, who may have purchased what was supposed to be nonhazardous scrap metal to be later recycled. U.S. EPA and IEPA teams also began inspecting Nicor service centers. To date, four scrap yards and seven Nicor service centers have been found to be contaminated requiring some degree of cleanup and removal.

On 9/5/00, Illinois State and County prosecutors filed a five count lawsuit in Cook County Circuit Court against Nicor and two subcontractors to compel Nicor to perform a timely and effective cleanup of those residential, commercial and industrial settings found to be contaminated with mercury. The suit requires Nicor to develop a cleanup plan to be approved and overseen by U.S. EPA, ATSDR and the various state agencies involved.

On 9/6/00, U.S. EPA issued a CERCLA UAO to Nicor for the immediate cleanup of all scrap yards, Nicor service centers and any other industrial facilities found to be contaminated. U.S. EPA, with IEPA support, will oversee these cleanups to eliminate and abate an imminent and substantial public health and environmental threat which currently may exist. Cleanup activities of scrap yard facilities should commence early next week.

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## Nicor ready to inspect local homes for mercury

### Gas company will send letters indicating which homes are at risk for contamination.

BY DAN SCHNOLIS Times Staff Writer

LANSING -- Nicor officials said nearly 100 inspection crews will be out in the field by the end of this week looking for mercury contamination in local homes.

The company supplies 1.9 million consumers in northern Illinois with natural gas. Nearly 200,000 homes of consumers need to be at least visually inspected, according to Nicor spokesman Lee Haines.

Those whose homes contain possible contamination will receive letters from the gas company, if they haven't already.

"What people need to be tuned into is if they received a letter," Haines said. "That letter will explain to them what is going to occur."

Village and gas company officials said every measure is being taken to ensure the safety of Lansing residents who use Nicor for their natural gas supply.

The threat of mercury contamination in the Chicago area moved closer to home last week, when Nicor found mercury in a Lansing house.

On Wednesday, Nicor crews discovered the mercury contamination in the unfinished basement of a Lansing family's home in the 18000 block of Roy Street. Workers quickly picked up the poisonous liquid and aired out the family's home.

The spill in the home happened in March 1999, when Nicor removed a decades-old gas meter from their home and replaced it with a new one outside.

It is unclear if the mercury has impacted the health of the family, but doctors appointments



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in Lansing, IL?  
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were scheduled in order to test family members.

"They have identified over 300 homes in Lansing that could have a problem because they (Nicor) moved the meters," Lansing Mayor Robert West said. "We were told about a month ago, with a letter sent through South Suburban Mayors and Managers, that our town was clean and green, so we were shocked."

West said he has been in contact with Nicor about the potential problems in the village and he is confident the company will handle the situation well.

"The message I was trying to get out to the citizens is that just because you might have gotten a letter from Nicor saying that you could possibly have a problem, or you've had a gas meter removed in the last several years, doesn't necessarily mean you're sick," West said. "It's just that it needs to be looked into."

Another Lansing family also reported a potential contamination problem when they had their old-style gas meter removed in October, West said.

Mercury is an silver-colored, odorless liquid that can cause health problems once it evaporates into the air. If ingested over an extended period of time, mercury poisoning can lead to respiratory, kidney and nervous system problems.

The trace amount of mercury found in the Lansing home last week is significant, but doesn't pose a great risk, Nicor officials said.

Home and business owners who have had their gas meters replaced are at risk. Homes built since 1961 are safe because the new gas regulators do not contain mercury, Haines said.

"They can also take themselves out of contention if their meter and regulator have always been outside," Haines said.

Nicor customers with contamination concerns should call the company's mercury hotline at (888) 288-8110.

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## FEARS LINGER AFTER MERCURY INSPECTION

### FAMILY LEARNS HOME NOW SAFE BUT AWAITS MEDICAL TEST RESULTS

By Virginia Groark  
Tribune Staff Writer  
September 10, 2000

Carrying a machine the size of a television camera fitted with a plastic tube, Fred Micke of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency moved methodically through Annette Mrugacz's home Saturday, testing for traces of mercury.

He inspected the basement, which used to be home to a gas meter before the Mrugacz's paid Nicor Gas to remove it four years ago so they could build a room for home-schooling their son.

He put the tube on the basement stairs. And he went into the 7-year-old boy's room, where tests eight days earlier had showed contamination.

In each place, Micke's portable device registered readings no greater than 42 nanograms per cubic meter, which he said is within the range for normal living conditions.

To prove how low the readings were, he stuck the tube in his mouth, where his mercury dental fillings helped register a reading of 160 nanograms per cubic meter.

"It's in good shape," Micke proclaimed after checking the home.

Conducting inspections is becoming a familiar task for Micke, a civil engineer and on-scene coordinator with the emergency response branch of the EPA.

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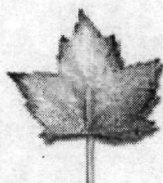
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With 80 Nicor customers' homes recently testing positive for mercury, EPA officials are conducting random spot-checks at sites Nicor said did not have a problem.

They also have visited homes where cleanup work has been done to make sure they are safe. In the process, they try to allay the fears of people like Mrugacz, who learned Sept. 1 that her home, including her son's bed, was contaminated.

"People have every right to be concerned," Micke said as he stood outside Mrugacz's house in unincorporated Marengo. "I can't blame anyone for being concerned."

On Saturday it was Mrugacz's turn. The 40-year-old woman called Nicor late last month after learning mercury had been spilled in homes during removal of gas meters.

During the cleanup and inspection process, Mrugacz, her husband, Greg, and son have been living in a West Dundee hotel with two dogs and a cat.

The family is awaiting results of medical tests for mercury exposure.

Although Micke repeatedly offered to test any part of the home that posed concerns, Mrugacz remained worried after the inspection was done. She has had some health problems in recent years and wonders if they are related to the mercury.

"I'm really apprehensive about moving back into the home," Mrugacz said. "I'm scared to death."

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FAMILY'S WORRIES ABOUT  
MERCURY LINGERAFTER GOOD NEWS FROM EPA,  
COUPLE AWAIT FURTHER TESTS

By Virginia Groark

Tribune Staff Writer

September 10, 2000

Four years ago, Annette and Greg Mrugacz paid Nicor Gas to remove a gas meter from their home so they could turn their basement into a place to home-school their son.

Since then, the Mrugaczes' home in unincorporated Marengo has been transformed into a hazardous-materials site. On Sept. 1, the Mrugaczes learned they are among the 80 Nicor customers whose residences were found to be contaminated with mercury after the meters were removed.

The mercury wasn't limited to the basement. Other living areas, including their son's bed, also tested positive.

With cleanup efforts under way, the family relocated to a West Dundee hotel along with two of their dogs and one of their cats. Now Annette Mrugacz spends her days on a hotel telephone talking to Nicor, hospital and government officials, and toxicologists.

"It's been really hard," she said.

But on Saturday, Mrugacz received good news from Fred Micke, civil engineer and on-scene coordinator for the Emergency Response Branch of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Testing her home, he found only "minuscule" levels of mercury, within the normal range.

Now Mrugacz anxiously awaits results of tests on her family for mercury exposure.

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That information may shed light on the illnesses she said she has suffered in the past four years, including a fever that lasted for several months after the meter was removed. Two years ago she was diagnosed with optic neuritis, which is sometimes associated with multiple sclerosis.

After reading about possible connections between mercury dental fillings and multiple sclerosis, Mrugacz had her mercury fillings replaced.

Now she said she wonders if the mercury contamination played a role in her eye condition.

"Whether they are connected or not is beyond me," she said. "But it was just too coincidental."

Mrugacz said Nicor has been very accommodating, loaning her a mini-van, giving her gift certificates to grocery, clothing and toy stores, and offering to groom her pets. But she is still concerned.

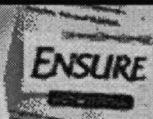
"I'm really apprehensive about moving back into the home," she said. "I'm scared to death."

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## ILLINOIS

### Nicor, state near pact on mercury cleanup

State prosecutors told a Cook County judge Friday that they are close to hammering out an agreement with Nicor Gas and two contractors for a speedy cleanup of mercury-contaminated homes and scrap yards.

Nicor and the two contractors were sued Tuesday by state and county prosecutors, who contend that the firms violated environmental laws and endangered the public health when they replaced 200,000 gas regulators in homes in northern Illinois.

The agreement is expected to be presented Tuesday to the judge.

Chicago Tribune 9-10-00

## Nicor contractor in mercury spill tied to similar occurrence in Pennsylvania

Daily Herald 9/11/00

Associated Press

A contractor accused of spilling mercury in Illinois homes while replacing gas meters botched a similar job in Pennsylvania so badly that 14 homes had to be tested and one torn down because of mercury spills, a newspaper reported.

Thousands of suburban Chicago homes are being tested for mercury contamination after it was discovered that workers for Henkels & McCoy of Blue Bell, Pa., spilled mercury in some homes while replacing meters for Nicor Gas.

Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte said he did not know if the company knew about the 1995 case in Pennsylvania, or of any involvement by Henkels & McCoy.

The case received media attention in Philadelphia, and an organization to which Nicor belongs was notified about it.

"Our legal department isn't even concerned with what happened five years ago," Whyte said.

PECO Energy Co. hired Henkels in 1995 to replace gas meters in a suburban Philadelphia neighborhood, PECO spokesman Michael Wood said.

Three months later, in February 1996, the owner of one of the homes found a spoonful of spilled mercury, he said. The cleanup cost rose to more than \$100,000 and eventually the home had to be torn down piece by piece to contain the contamination, Wood said.

"It threw the whole neighborhood

into turmoil for three months," said John Camp, who lives across the street from the house that was torn down.

Now, Henkels is named along with Nicor and another contractor in a lawsuit filed by Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan, charging them with violating environmental laws and endangering public health.

Nicor began testing homes in a handful of suburbs in late July after learning that Henkels workers may have spilled small amounts of mercury while removing old-style gas pressure regulators.

But concern spread to most of Nicor's service area after the company detected mercury in a home where one of its own technicians had removed an outdated gas pressure regulator. The utility serves 1.9 million customers in northern Illinois. Nicor said it would inspect more than 200,000 homes throughout northern Illinois for possible mercury contamination, but Ryan said the company's timetable of four to six months is too long.

As of Thursday, 1,541 homes had been screened for mercury contamination in suburban Chicago, with 77 testing positive, news reported stated. Crews are cleaning 52 homes, and the remaining 25 have been cleared for families to return. Mercury is a silver, odorless liquid that can cause respiratory, neurological or kidney problems if it evaporates and is inhaled in high levels over a long period of time.

Chicago Sun-Times  
9-11-00

Chicago Sun-Times

## METRO BRIEFS

### Nicor to explain how it will step up mercury inspections

Nicor Gas on Tuesday is expected to present details on how it will speed up inspections of 200,000 suburban homes to see if any mercury spilled from old regulators. The plan will be submitted to Judge Paul B. Biebel Jr., who is hearing a lawsuit filed against Nicor by the state and Cook and DuPage counties. So far, the Naperville company has checked 1,636 homes in about 40 suburbs and detected mercury vapors in 80.



# Contractor in spill has

**By The Associated Press**

A contractor accused of spilling mercury in Illinois homes while replacing gas meters botched a similar job in Pennsylvania so badly that 14 homes had to be tested and one torn down because of mercury spills, a newspaper reported.

Thousands of suburban Chicago homes are being tested for mercury contamination after it was discovered that workers for Henkels & McCoy of Blue Bell, Pa., spilled mercury in some

homes while replacing meters for Nicor Gas.

Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte said he did not know if the company knew about the 1995 case in Pennsylvania, or of any involvement by Henkels & McCoy.

The case received media attention in Philadelphia, and an organization to which Nicor belongs was notified about it.

"Our legal department isn't even concerned with what happened five years ago," Whyte told the Chicago Tribune for a story in

its Sunday editions.

PECO Energy Co. hired Henkels in 1995 to replace gas meters in a suburban Philadelphia neighborhood, PECO spokesman Michael Wood said.

Three months later, in February 1996, the owner of one of the homes found a spoonful of spilled mercury, he said. The cleanup cost rose to more than \$100,000 and eventually the home had to be torn down piece by piece to contain the contamination, Wood said.

"It threw the whole neighbor-

Daily Southtown

## problematic history

hood into turmoil for three months," said John Camp, who lives across the street from the house that was torn down."

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too long.

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Mercury is a silver, odorless liquid that can cause respiratory, neurological or kidney problems if it evaporates and is inhaled in high levels over a long period of time.

# Meter firm Nicor used bungled earlier job

Philadelphia house  
had to be torn down  
after mercury spill

By Jeff Long

TRIBUNE ENVIRONMENT WRITER

Three years before Nicor Gas brought in a Pennsylvania contractor to replace gas meters in Illinois homes, the contractor was hired in Philadelphia for a similar project—one that was botched so badly that a house had to be torn down because of a mercury spill.

The Philadelphia case also led to 14 other homes being tested for mercury contamination, a foreshadowing of the mercury spills that have made it necessary for Nicor to test about 200,000 homes for contamination in Illinois.

The disclosure raises more troubling questions for Nicor and the way the utility handled its program to replace old gas meters that contain toxic mercury.

Nicor officials, scrambling to deal with the growing problem, say they don't know if they were aware of the previous problems with the contractor, Henkels & McCoy of Blue Bell, Pa.

Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte said he was not aware of the Pennsylvania case, or of Henkels' involvement in it. He did not know whether anyone at Nicor had known about the case, which made headlines in Philadelphia and was brought to the attention of a gas industry group to which Nicor belongs.

"Our legal department isn't even concerned with what happened five years ago," Whyte said.

The Pennsylvania contamination began in November 1995, af-

## Nicor

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

ter PECO Energy Co. had hired Henkels as its contractor on a project to replace gas meters in a suburban Philadelphia neighborhood, according to Michael Wood, a spokesman for the Pennsylvania utility.

In one of those homes, an owner found a spoonful of spilled mercury about three months later, in February 1996, Wood said. The cost to clean the home grew to more than \$100,000, and eventually it had to be razed—dismantled, piece by piece—to contain the contamination.

"As much testing and monitoring and cleanup took place, it was unsuccessful," Wood said. "The home was taken down. It was dismantled."

"It threw the whole neighborhood into turmoil for three months," said John Camp, who lives across the street from where the contaminated house once stood.

Now, Henkels is named along with Nicor and another contractor in a lawsuit filed by Illinois Atty. Gen. Jim Ryan.

Ryan and prosecutors in Cook and DuPage Counties say Nicor, Henkels and another contractor, Northern Pipeline Construction Co. of Minnesota, have violated environmental laws and endangered public health.

Steven Theis, Henkels' corporate director for safety, health and environment, confirmed that Henkels employees had been working in the Pennsylvania house that eventually had to be taken apart.

But Theis said his company is still investigating the circumstances that led to the contamination in Illinois. He said that Henkels, which was hired to install gas lines as well as replace meters, removed regulators from just 100 of the 200,000 homes that Nicor is now testing. The rest, Theis said, were removed by Northern Pipeline and by Nicor employees, and much of that work dates to before Henkels was hired.

Theis said different utilities, such as PECO and Nicor, often have different procedures and training for removing the old regulators. But since the circumstances are still murky, he couldn't say for certain how PECO's procedure differs from Nicor's procedure, if at all.

"In the case of Nicor," Theis said, "it's not clear what training was provided or who provided it."

According to Wood, PECO revised its procedures for dealing with mercury immediately after the contamination was discovered in 1996. For example, workers must wear protective clothing when handling mercury, and the pressure in gas pipes must be turned off.

Essentially, the revised PECO policy cautions its workers and contractors about the care that must be taken when dealing with the potentially dangerous substance.

For good reason.

Over time, exposure to even small amounts of mercury can cause permanent damage to the brain, kidneys, lungs and to developing fetuses.

They could not say why similar accidents appear to have happened in Illinois five years after his company was involved in the Pennsylvania incident.

"That's under investigation," Theis said.

As the scope of the Illinois contamination continues to grow, the American Gas Association, an advocacy group for gas utilities, has been spreading the word about Nicor's problems to its members.

"This is one of those things where our role is to keep other utilities informed about what's happening in Illinois, and how Nicor is handling it," said Daphne Magnuson, a spokeswoman for the association.

By Thursday, 1,541 homes had been screened for mercury contamination in suburban Chicago, with 1,464 testing negative and 77 testing positive. Crews are cleaning 52 homes; the remaining 25 have been cleared for families to return.

In the case of the contaminated house in Pennsylvania, furniture and carpets were cleaned, insulation was removed, floors and walls were scrubbed repeatedly. But ongoing tests showed that levels of mercury in the home remained too high for people to live there.

Rather than continue the cleanup, PECO cut its losses. It paid off the homeowner's mortgage of \$96,522 and also settled with the owner for an undisclosed amount.

The homeowner could not be reached for comment.

Like PECO, Nicor was updating its equipment to meters that are outside the home. The new meters do not contain mercury, which until the 1960s was used in regulators to decrease the pressure of the gas coming into the home.

Just 15 homes were tested by PECO for possible mercury contamination in Pennsylvania, and only the one that had to be torn down had persistently dangerous amounts of mercury, according to the PECO spokesman, Wood.

Mercury is very difficult to remove from a home once it's had time to get a foothold, according to Jack Kelly, who served as a health consultant for the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry during the Pennsylvania cleanup.

Now, Kelly is an on-site coordinator

in the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's regional office in Philadelphia. He's familiar with mercury and the harm it can cause.

"It's almost impossible to get out of fabric," Kelly said. "Unfortunately, it's very hard to get rid of."

The EPA oversaw the cleanup in Pennsylvania. Bill Steuteville, the on-site coordinator for the job, said such spills during the removal of old gas regulators appear to be relatively rare, nationwide.

Magnuson, the gas association representative, also said it's uncommon.

"We're mainly aware of anecdotal kinds of things," she said. "It is pretty rare, pretty isolated."

Wood, the PECO spokesman,

agreed that the spills appear to be rare. In his company's case, Wood said, the incident was isolated. Still, that one spill caused plenty of problems.

"I visited the neighborhood," he said. "This was unlike anything we had ever handled before. It really was a matter that was unknown to the residents we were dealing with, and the township officials—that something so small could be so dangerous."

When it was over, Wood recalled, PECO passed on what it had learned to the American Gas Association.

"We shared our experiences," he said.



## Previous work led to contamination problem

Three years after Henkels & McCoy Inc. was involved in a mercury spill that led to a suburban Philadelphia home being torn down, Nicor Gas hired the company to do similar work in Illinois: remove old gas-meter regulators that contain mercury. A look at some of Henkels' dealings in Pennsylvania and Illinois.

**November 1995:** Henkels, under contract to PECO Energy Co., begins removing old regulators and meters from homes in Abington Township, near Philadelphia.

**February 1996:** A homeowner discovers mercury in his basement and calls the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Testing begins on 15 homes where old regulators had been removed; the first house is the only one found to have high levels of contamination.

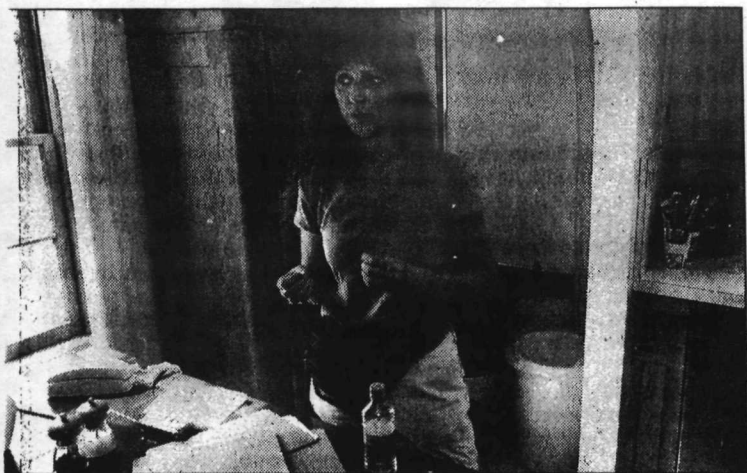
**April 17, 1996:** A weeklong demolition of the contaminated house, which must be taken apart one section at a time, begins. Cleanup costs top \$100,000. PECO agrees to pay the rest of the homeowner's mortgage and also settles for an undisclosed amount.

**January 1999:** Nicor hires Henkels & McCoy to help build natural gas lines. Part of the work includes removing old gas meters that have mercury-containing regulators.

**July 24, 2000:** A Mount Prospect residents tells the EPA that there's a mercury spill in his home and several others in his neighborhood. Henkels had replaced the meter and regulator in the home July 12.

**Sept. 7, 2000:** By now, Nicor has screened 1,541 homes for mercury contamination; 1,464 are negative, 77 positive. Twenty-five homes have been cleaned and cleared and 52 have cleaning under way.

Source: PECO, news reports



Annette Mrugacz is still uneasy even though her home was declared safe. "I'm really apprehensive about moving back into the home."

## Fears linger after mercury inspection

Family learns home now safe but awaits medical test results

By Virginia Groark  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

Carrying a machine the size of a television camera fitted with a plastic tube, Fred Micke of the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency moved methodically through Annette Mrugacz's home Saturday, testing for traces of mercury.

He inspected the basement, which used to be home to a gas meter before the Mrugacz family paid Nicor Gas to remove it four years ago so they could build a room for home-schooling their son.

He put the tube on the basement stairs. And he went into the 7-year-old boy's room, where tests eight days earlier had showed contamination.

In each place, Micke's portable device registered readings no greater

than 42 nanograms per cubic meter, which he said is within the range for normal living conditions.

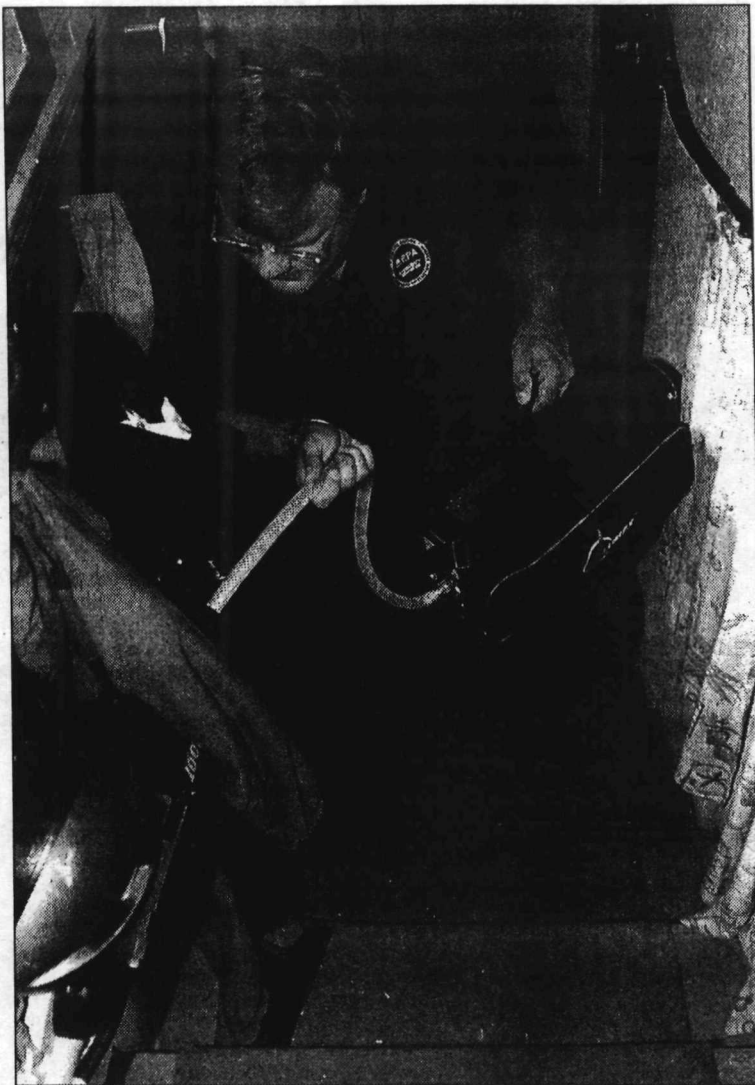
To prove how low the readings were, he stuck the tube in his mouth, where his mercury dental fillings helped register a reading of 160 nanograms per cubic meter.

"It's in good shape," Micke claimed after checking the home.

Conducting inspections is becoming a familiar task for Micke, a civil engineer and on-scene coordinator with the emergency response branch of the EPA. With 80 Nicor customers' homes recently testing positive for mercury, EPA officials are conducting random spot-checks at sites Nicor said did not have a problem.

They also have visited homes where cleanup work has been done to make sure they are safe. In the process, they try to allay the fears of people like Mrugacz, who learned Sept. 1 that her home, including her son's bed, was contaminated.

"People have every right to be concerned," Micke said as he stood outside Mrugacz's house in unin-



Tribune photos by Phil Greer

Fred Micke of the Environmental Protection Agency checks the basement of the house in unincorporated Marengo for mercury.

corporated Marengo. "I can't blame anyone for being concerned."

On Saturday it was Mrugacz's turn. The 40-year-old woman called Nicor late last month after learning mercury had been spilled in homes during removal of gas meters.

During the cleanup and inspection process, Mrugacz, her husband, Greg, and son have been living in a West Dundee hotel with two dogs and a cat.

The family is awaiting results of

medical tests for mercury exposure.

Although Micke repeatedly offered to test any part of the home that posed concerns, Mrugacz remained worried after the inspection was done. She has had some health problems in recent years and wonders if they are related to the mercury.

"I'm really apprehensive about moving back into the home," Mrugacz said. "I'm scared to death."

# Action slow on airborne mercury

By John Young

**T**alk about a cryptic acronym. Ten years ago a research arm of the nation's utilities established the Power Plant Integrated System Chemical Emission Study.

That's PISCES, the zodiac sign of the fish. PISCES was established to study mercury levels in coal and in the exhaust of coal-fired power plants.

Today, a lot of people are doing the same type of mercury analysis, on fish. And the evidence is convincing: Increasingly, fish are getting mercury poisoning, at least in part from the air. That means mercury is going who-knows-where-else.

Congress was skeptical two years ago when the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency prepared to crack down on mercury pollution by coal-fired plants. It stopped the EPA from enforcing restrictions until it had more information.

Last month that information arrived. A panel assembled by the National Academy of Sciences stated that the EPA was right to be setting stringent mercury standards for power plants.

This confirmation is set against a backdrop of mounting evidence about the dangers of methylmercury linked to power-plant emissions.

For a long time utilities dismissed this as speculation—that the mercury was in the water naturally or from other sources. There are many sources of mercury pollution, some natural. But a growing source is air pollution.

The nation's power plants emit 50 tons of mercury every year—one-third of all mercury introduced into our environment. While Texas controls mercury in such emitters as waste incinerators, it and many other states don't in utilities.

The issue seems hard to grasp. It helps to get down to earth, actually, to go under water—to the Steinhagen Reservoir in Jasper County, Texas, where you'd be wise to put back that large-mouth bass. Steinhagen is among a growing list of Texas lakes with mercury advisories—also places like Sam Rayburn Reservoir near Nacogdoches.

The link between coal-fired plants and any location is hard to prove. Acidic soil, or acidity that comes from sulfur dioxide emissions and acid rain, is said to contribute to the creation of methylmercury in water when airborne mercury is introduced.

Texas has no routine testing of waterways and aquatic life for mercury. If it did, say environmental

groups, it would probably have far more fish advisories. Minnesota has issued hundreds of fish advisories, not because it is more polluted but because it is more diligent. (Fish from Illinois waters are tested for pollutants, including mercury.)

It would seem that diligence is in order. When ingested by a pregnant woman, methylmercury makes a bee-line for the womb. It passes through the placenta and accumulates, where it can cause brain damage or long-range development problems.

Aside from mothers and fathers, fishing industries have the most to lose from mercury poisoning. The U.S. Tuna Foundation urged Congress to get off the dime on the issue of curbing mercury emissions.

In Texas, this year the Public Utility Commission issued a wide-ranging edict requiring utilities to look ahead 10 years to what pollution controls will be required and to estimate the costs, including the retrofitting or retiring of grandfathered power plants.

Mercury was among the major pollutants cited by the PUC along with biggies like ozone and greenhouse gases.

In December, the EPA will come out with a mercury action plan postponed two years by a disbelieving Congress. One wonders how many years that action will take.

Cox News Service

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Illustration by Richard Milholland

*John Young is opinion page editor of the Waco Tribune-Herald.*

Chicago Tribune 9-10-00



# Nicor is told to develop junkyard cleanup plan

## Mercury and dumping top concerns for EPA

By Ray Gibson  
and T. Shawn Taylor  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

9/8/00

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency on Thursday ordered Nicor Gas to develop a formal plan for a speedy cleanup of a south suburban junkyard where mercury-filled gas regulators have allegedly been illegally dumped.

Under a tough enforcement provision in federal Superfund environmental laws, Nicor was ordered to create what will in effect be a blueprint for other possible cleanups at other industrial sites that may have been contaminated with mercury.

"(The law) is a hammer at our disposal," said Mick Hans, a spokesman for the agency. If Nicor doesn't comply with the order, the U.S. EPA could move forward on its own and clean up the site. Nicor would face triple the cost of the cleanup and disposal of the gas regulators or \$25,000-a-day fines.

Nicor has told the federal agency it may submit by Friday the plan for removal and disposal of hundreds of regulators dumped at the site, said Tom Krueger, a lawyer with the agency.

"If they want it, we'll give it to them," Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte said of the plan. Whyte said the company has been cooperating with the environmental agency.

Still unclear is how many of the hundreds of gas regulators discovered last week at Chicago Heights Iron & Supply, 1715 Wentworth Ave., Chicago Heights, contain mercury. A spot-check last week found eight of 10 regulators contained the toxic liquid metal, but the condition of others made it difficult to determine if they still held mercury.

The U.S. EPA also said Thursday that it and its Illinois counterpart were expanding their search of Illinois junkyards that may have inadvertently purchased the regulators for scrap or accepted them for disposal.

According to Hans, the agencies are inspecting 25 junkyards. Last week, Nicor gave the agencies a list that included 15 possible locations where the gas regulators had been taken.

Dennis McMurray, a spokesman for the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency, said investigators last week found additional, unreported regulators at a

SEE NICOR, PAGE 2

## Nicor

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

DeKalb junkyard after receiving an anonymous tip from a Nicor employee.

In addition to Chicago Heights and DeKalb, regulators containing mercury have been found at junkyards in Joliet, Loda and Ottawa.

Nicor hasn't installed any regulators that use mercury to control the flow of natural gas since 1961. But as part of a process to move meters from inside homes to outside, the company for more than a decade has been replacing the old meters and their regulators in 200,000 homes. The new devices do not contain mercury.

Nicor and two contractors hired to relocate the meters were sued Tuesday by the Illinois attorney general's office and the Cook and DuPage County state's attorneys for allegedly spilling mercury when meters were relocated.

That lawsuit seeks to expedite cleanup of homes contaminated by mercury as well as the Chicago Heights junkyard. Nicor has said it expects to notify all 200,000 homeowners who may have been affected in six months, but prosecutors contend in their lawsuit that isn't soon enough.

Nicor has been concentrating on 15,000 customers whose homes had meters relocated in the last five years. As of Thursday, 1,141 homes had been screened for contamination with 71 testing positive, said Whyte.

But federal environmental officials contend that although some regulators did end up at the junkyards and some of the regulators weren't drained thoroughly, some of the mercury was disposed of properly.

Last week, Nicor officials conceded it had improperly disposed of some gas regulators. But the issue of how many regulators were dumped, whether they contain mercury, and whether the firm was abiding by tough state and federal environmental rules is a key issue in the dispute with state and federal officials.

The lawsuit accuses the firm of illegal dumping and violating Illinois environmental laws, but the fines sought in the lawsuit, which are \$50,000 for each violation and \$10,000 a day for illegal dumping, could decrease dramatically if Nicor can prove the dumping wasn't widespread.

In addition, not all the regulators investigators are discovering contain mercury. For example, only 2 of 178 regulators found at the company's service center in Crestwood were mercury-type regulators.

Thursday, officials from Nicor and Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge met to discuss guidelines for testing gas company customers for possible contamination after Nicor ordered the hospital to suspend testing of walk-ins Wednesday.

To date, the hospital has handed out 700 urine test kits to anyone who walked in and indicated they had an old gas meter removed recently. So far 330 kits have been returned and sent to a lab for testing at a cost to Nicor of \$60 each, said Lynn Soderlund, Lutheran General's vice president of operations.

Wednesday, Nicor identified a protocol that would require customers to first call its hot line, 888-288-8110, and request a home assessment, then limit testing to those who receive Nicor authorization. In addition, each person would have to make an appointment to be seen by a Lutheran General physician in conjunction with the test, she said.

Soderlund said the hot line is "not easy to get through" and called the proposed changes confusing and a burden on families who are frustrated and concerned.

"I can understand not wanting to have everybody in the world go for testing . . . but I don't quite understand the rationale in this," she said.

She also questioned the need for a doctor's visit. Of the 120 results all have come back negative, she said. For now, Soderlund said walk-ins are still welcome and physician visits have been placed on hold. Nicor was expected to reassess the testing process and offer a more clear solution by Friday, she said.

## 5-T 7/8 State wants to speed Nicor work

State prosecutors today will ask Cook County Circuit Court Judge Paul Biebel to speed Nicor's six-month timeline to check for possible mercury spills from old gas regulators removed from as many as 200,000 suburban homes. Meanwhile, inspectors Thursday recorded low-level mercury contamination at Nicor service centers in Dixon and Glen Ellyn, where workers took some of the regulators. The discoveries bring to seven the number of Nicor centers where state and federal inspectors have detected mercury vapors. They also have discovered mercury-filled regulators at privately owned scrapyards in Chicago Heights, Joliet, DeKalb and Ottawa in violation of state and federal law. Nicor must submit a cleanup plan for the Chicago Heights scrapyard to the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency by early next week, the agency announced.



# Mercury troubles continue

9/8/02  
More homes added to list for inspection

By Lisa Pevtzow and John Dobberstein

Staff Writers

As more homes were added to Nicor's mercury screening list — including 44 in Lemont — environmental officials combed through Illinois scrap yards and Nicor service centers Thursday and found more mercury contamination.

At the same time, a federal order has been issued requiring the gas company to develop a formal work plan for cleanup of mercury contamination in Chicago Heights.

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency has ordered Nicor to file a detailed plan for investigation and cleanup at Chicago Heights Iron and Supply, where the first batch of mercury-filled regulators was discovered Aug. 31.

As of Thursday, 31 service centers and 17 scrap yards have been inspected for potential mercury contamination from Nicor's regulators. Mercury traces were found in Dixon, Glen Ellyn, DeKalb and Ottawa.

Nine more service centers and eight more scrap yards still must be examined, according to U.S. EPA officials. Inspections will continue through early next week.

"With this order, Nicor must establish formal procedures — subject to EPA review and approval — for the cleanup and off-site disposal of mercury at any industrial facilities identified during this evolving situation. And Nicor must follow those procedures when it begins cleanup of the Chicago Heights facility," said U.S. EPA regional administrator Francis X. Lyons.

Nicor spokesman Craig Whyte said the gas company already is

Continued from page 1

working with the EPA on a cleanup plan.

"We're on top of that right now," Whyte said.

The order comes a day after the public learned homes in 56 Southland communities must be inspected for mercury contamination and two days after the Illinois attorney general filed a civil suit against Nicor seeking full disclosure of information about the mercury disposal problem.

Thursday, Lemont officials confirmed Nicor will screen 44 homes for possible mercury contamination. Earlier this week, residents in Plainfield learned 34 homes would be screened. In Lockport, 24 homes must be examined.

The Chicago Heights scrap yard was the first non-residential site identified as having residual contamination from mercury-containing regulators Nicor had removed from service.

Under the EPA order, if Nicor does not perform the cleanup, EPA's Superfund program has full legal authority to move forward with a cleanup of the Chicago Heights scrap yard, according to EPA officials.

The government would then pursue Nicor for the cost.

A representative of Chicago Heights Iron and Supply, which sells its scrap to steel mills in the Chicago area, told the Daily Southtown Thursday the junk yard has not been closed.

Employees have been tested for mercury exposure, but the test results have not been received, yet.

Federal officials expect to receive the Nicor work plan for the Chicago Heights scrap yard by early next week.

Meanwhile, Illinois EPA officials returned to scrap yards in DeKalb and Ottawa Thursday and found some gas meter regulators containing mercury.

Nine devices were opened at DeKalb Iron and Metal, and five had mercury in them. Four others were emitting mercury vapors, officials said. One regulator with mercury inside was found at Newston Iron in Ottawa.

Earlier this week, regulators with mercury inside were found at Berlinsky Iron in Joliet.

Sending regulators containing mercury to scrap yards violates federal and state laws that govern hazardous waste. A contractor for the Illinois EPA, Clean Harbors Inc., will store the opened regulators as potential evidence, the agency said.

Also Thursday, teams from the Illinois EPA and the U.S. EPA visited 14 Nicor service centers.

A scrap metal box in a fenced area about one block west of the Dixon service center had a mercury vapor reading of .758 mg per cubic meter of air — the highest reading recorded at a service center so far, officials said.

That site will be revisited Monday for more investigation.

Two mercury-type regulators also were found in an outside

## mercury probe

Southland communities with homes that will be checked for mercury contamination include:

Bedford Park  
Blue Island  
Bridgeview  
Burbank  
Burnham  
Calumet City  
Calumet Park  
Chicago  
Chicago Heights  
Chicago Ridge  
Country Club Hills  
Countryside  
Crest Hill  
Crestwood  
Crete  
Dixmoor  
Dolton  
East Hazel Crest  
Evergreen Park  
Flossmoor  
Glenwood  
Harvey  
Hazel Crest  
Homer Township  
Homewood  
Joliet  
Joliet Township  
Justice  
Lansing  
Lemont  
Lockport  
Lockport Township  
Markham  
Matteson  
Midlothian  
Monee  
Oak Forest  
Oak Lawn  
Olympia Fields  
Palos Heights  
Palos Hills  
Park Forest  
Phoenix  
Plainfield  
Posen  
Richton Park  
Robbins  
Rockdale  
South Chicago Heights  
South Holland  
Steger  
Stickney Township  
Summit  
Thornton  
Willow Springs  
Worth

dumpster at the Glen Ellyn service center.

When opened, one still had mercury inside, and the air meter reading indicated some mercury was present in the other one, the Illinois EPA said.

The Nicor service center at Prospect Heights was revisited, and no mercury-type regulators were found.

Monday, service centers in Ingleside and Shorewood will be reinspected because of prior mercury vapor readings taken from the air.

No regulators or mercury contamination was found Thursday at the other 12 Nicor service centers, officials said.

Lisa Pevtzow is the health and environment writer for the Daily Southtown. Readers who have received notification from Nicor that their houses will be checked for possible mercury contamination may call her at (708) 633-5994.

See **Mercury** page 2



# EPA NEWS

Att. Mic Hennes

Sept. 6, 2000

## NEWS MEDIA UPDATE

An Illinois Environmental Protection Agency team today, assisted by hazardous waste contractor Clean Harbors, Inc., revisited Berlinsky Iron in Joliet today and opened eight mercury type regulators from gas meters and found evidence of mercury in all of them. The scrapyard was previously identified by Nicor Corp. as one of several salvage facilities where the regulators had been sent as scrap metal. Five of the regulators had intact visible mercury and high air meter readings indicated the three others also still contained some mercury.

Also today, mercury levels of concern were recorded in the air at three of 11 Nicor service centers that were inspected by Illinois EPA for the presence of mercury-type regulators. At the Ingleside (1201 E. Rte. 134) service center, a reading of .434 milograms per cubic meter for mercury in the air was recorded at a general refuse dumpster. Nicor was asked not to allow the removal of the dumpster refuse until further investigation. At the Shorewood (1111 Cottage St.) service center, mercury air readings of .326 were registered in a container outside the facility. At the Prospect Heights (45 E. Palatine Road) center, a dumpster containing regulators had a 0.021 reading. Illinois EPA will re-inspect the facilities and monitor any appropriate cleanup activities.

The immediate danger to life and health safety level is 2 milograms per cubic meter. The OSHA/NIOSH safety level for eight-hour exposure to five days a week is 0.01 milograms per cubic meter. Zero air readings for mercury were recorded at the perimeter of the sites visited today, indicating no hazard to the general public.

Sending regulators still containing mercury to scrapyards violates federal and state hazardous waste handling laws and regulations.

The mercury detections at Berlinsky follows an inspection last week at Chicago Heights Steel and Iron, where eight of 10 regulators that were opened still had mercury inside them.

The Illinois EPA/Clean Harbors personnel will return on Thursday to DeKalb Iron and Metal (DeKalb) and Newton Iron (Ottawa). They were the only two scrapyards among 11 visited on Tuesday that appeared to have the mercury type regulators. The regulators at those facilities will also be sampled and opened to determine if they still contain mercury.

Another Illinois EPA team today monitored removal of regulators from a roll-off box at the Nicor Bellwood Service Center. Air monitor readings at the box recorded on Sept. 2 in a previous IEPA inspection raised concerns. A cracked regulator in the container will be handled as hazardous waste and the container will be decontaminated to prevent vaporization.

At the Crestwood Service Center, where mercury levels in the area recorded on Sept. 2 also were of concern, two of 178 regulators inspected in a container were determined to be mercury type. One of them when opened still contained mercury and the other could not be opened.

Illinois EPA will continue to inspect other Nicor service centers this week.

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I. /  
9/5/01



Mick Hans

09/05/01 07:40 AM

To: Linda Nachowicz/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, BRAD  
STIMPLE/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, FREDRICK  
MICKE/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, FRED  
BARTMAN/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, RICHARD  
KARL/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, Thomas  
Krueger/R5/USEPA/US@EPA, RALPH  
DOLLHOPF/R5/USEPA/US@EPA  
cc: Anne Rowan/R5/USEPA/US@EPA  
Subject: FYI. Mercury clip.

FYI. From today's Daily Southtown.

**Suits persist against Nicor  
Mercury troubles still unresolved**

Wednesday, September 5, 2001

By Guy Tridgell  
Staff writer

Last year, on a Thursday in late July, a silvery liquid was found in the basement of a home in northwest suburban Mount Prospect.

The substance was identified as mercury.

The discovery signaled the first drops in an eventual torrent.

The mercury was determined to have slithered from old indoor meters removed by Nicor Inc., the suburban supplier of natural gas. Nicor for the rest of the summer scrambled to explain the gaffe, while more and more houses that had the meters were checked.

Within a month, the mercury scare had spread to include dozens of other towns and hundreds of thousands of houses.

People were ordered from homes where mercury was found. Scrap yards in Chicago Heights and Joliet were temporarily closed after the old meters were discovered.

People panicked. Politicians blasted Nicor for misleading the public.

Headlines and stories about the dangers of mercury poisoning followed.

The furor sparked a flurry of lawsuits that will become a postscript slowly written for months, possibly years, to come.

The scare might have captured attention for a few weeks, but the resolution will take much longer without the same spotlight.

"We didn't expect this," said Craig Whyte, spokesman for the Naperville-based utility. "We didn't expect this project at all."



More than 300,000 houses, including several in the south and southwest suburbs, were identified for possible mercury contamination. About 100,000 were eliminated through record checks.

Of the 175,000 houses inspected, 957 were found to have traces of mercury. They have been cleaned and cleared for occupancy.

Mercury attacks the central nervous system, causing tremors, headaches, memory loss, insomnia, loss of appetite and irritability.

Most of the dangers subside over time and with the appropriate treatment.

But Nicor and public health officials did not have the luxury of time to explain the dangers of mercury.

Matt Dunn, chief of environmental enforcement for the Illinois attorney general's office, said Nicor originally expected the mercury checks to be confined to a few hundred homes.

"Every day it was just mushrooming almost uncontrollably," Dunn said. "Simple kinds of questions — What is involved? What homes? How many homes? What steps are being taken to clean them up? — nobody could answer them."

The state sued Nicor in September, alleging the company endangered public health and welfare. Prosecutors in Cook and Will counties later added their names to the suit.

The frustration came at a time when seemingly every utility was under fire for high-profile gaffes. Public confidence in Nicor consequently was not high.

"We were not trying to fan the flames," Dunn said. "Nicor wasn't on top of it early on. The media was seeing that same picture. They were asking tough questions that were not getting answered."

The company clearly was caught off guard.

"The situation started out small, and we treated it as relatively small," Whyte said. "As it grew, we grew with it."

Dunn today credits Nicor for its swift response.

About 38,000 homes have yet to be checked. Officials with the utility and attorney general suspect some of those owners are preparing to sue and are instructed not to cooperate with Nicor and jeopardize any future lawsuits.

"There is very little we can do," Whyte said. "They can do whatever they want. We can't go in if they don't want us to."

Lawrence Malis, owner of the Chicago Heights scrap yard where some of the regulators were

discovered, said a settlement reached with Nicor prohibits him from talking about the experience. A few brief comments, however, revealed some of his feelings.

"It was no hazard," Malis said. "A big story out of nothing."

Every two weeks or so, lawyers for the attorney general and Nicor meet with a judge to discuss the case. Both sides said negotiations are going well and should soon produce a resolution.

Waiting for the results are personal injury lawyers who cannot proceed with their lawsuits until the state case is resolved. A pending class-action lawsuit also is in the works.

Chicago lawyer Shawn Kasserman is representing nine families in the west and northwest suburbs where mercury was found.

He said some of his clients suffer from headaches, respiratory ailments and cognitive problems.

There also are questions about what detrimental effects, if any, the mercury had on property values.

Kasserman said the assortment of lawsuits potentially could take years to unravel.

"There are a lot of legal issues that need to be ironed out," he said. "It will take time."

There are more threatening chemicals than mercury that people encounter every day.

All it took last year was a few drops for the questions to start.

"It was not the biggest health scare," Dunn said. "We look back at this and think, 'Thank God.'"

Guy Tridgell may be reached at [gtridgell@dailysouthtown.com](mailto:gtridgell@dailysouthtown.com) or (708) 633-5970.



# Jim Ryan

ILLINOIS ATTORNEY GENERAL

## NEWS RELEASE

### TOP PROSECUTORS SUE TO SPEED MERCURY CLEAN-UP

For Immediate Release  
September 5, 2000

Further Information:  
Dan Curry  
(312) 814-2518

CHICAGO -- Top state and county prosecutors filed a five-count lawsuit today in Cook County Circuit Court against Nicor Inc. and two contractors in an attempt to compel a swift and effective clean-up of mercury contamination in northern Illinois.

In filing the suit, Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan, Cook County State's Attorney Richard A. Devine and DuPage County State's Attorney Joseph Birkett said that court action was necessary to ensure the hazardous material is removed quickly and properly from homes, buildings and junkyards in northern Illinois counties outside Chicago.

Since mercury was first discovered in a home in northwest suburban Mount Prospect on July 24, the contamination problem has been determined to possibly affect 200,000 homes, more than a dozen junkyards and at least two Nicor service centers.

"People in northern Illinois deserve certainty as to the scope and resolution of this troubling contamination," said Attorney General Ryan, who formed a task force of state and federal agencies on Aug. 23 to assist in the evaluation and clean-up efforts. "I'm not satisfied with the pace of Nicor's work. We want the court to compel quicker answers and quicker action."

"We are asking the court to order that Nicor clean up these mercury-laced homes, clean up contaminated sites and clean up its act," said Cook County State's Attorney Devine.

"The right of every person in this state to a healthful environment requires us to take this action," commented DuPage County State's Attorney Birkett. "This complaint alleges that scores of homeowners and their families have already been victimized."

The suit is also supported by the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. IEPA Director Tom Skinner said, "Nicor has created a mess in northern Illinois that is potentially dangerous to human health and the environment. It has violated multiple state laws and



regulations. Now Nicor must deal with the consequences, starting with a rapid and thorough clean-up."

In the lawsuit, the state and counties allege that Illinois-based Nicor, Pennsylvania-based Henkels & McCoy, Inc., and Minnesota-based Northern Pipeline Construction Co. endangered the public health and welfare, caused air pollution, caused open dumping, improperly disposed of waste and created a public nuisance.

Prosecutors are asking for an immediate injunction order setting forth a swift and supervised assessment and clean-up program. The suit also seeks civil penalties of \$50,000 for each violation of law and additional penalties of \$10,000 per day for those violations.

The suit asks the court to require Nicor to:

- immediately notify and screen all homes, junkyards and service centers potentially affected by mercury contamination;
- clean-up those homes, junkyards and service centers according to a schedule agreeable to federal, state and county agencies;
- cooperate fully with federal, state and county agencies. That includes providing sample results, daily status reports and access for government experts and consultants to examine assessment and clean-up progress;
- provide health screenings to any potentially affected persons;
- cease removal of any mercury regulators until proper procedures have been put in place and approved by plaintiffs;
- provide a plan for proper disposal or recycling of mercury contained in the regulators;
- underwrite a fund or surety bond with the Cook County Circuit Court Clerk to cover the costs of reimbursement to residents for relocation or repairs.

Attorney General Ryan said the task force headed by his office will continue to meet regularly to monitor the mercury contamination situation. The task force includes representatives from the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the IEPA, the Illinois Department of Public Health, the Cook County State's Attorney's office, the DuPage County State's Attorney's office, the Illinois Commerce Commission, the Illinois Poison Control Center and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry.

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## SWEEP YIELDS MERCURY AT 2 NICOR SITES

### NO TRACES FOUND IN 4 SCRAP YARDS

By Ruth E. Igoe and Raoul V. Mowatt

Tribune Staff Writers  
September 3, 2000

Environmental inspectors on Saturday found high levels of mercury at two Nicor service centers where old gas meters and mercury-filled pressure regulators are stored before being dumped in scrap yards.

Four scrap yards where used meters were discarded also were inspected, but no traces of mercury were found.

The floor of the Nicor service center at 615 Eastern Ave. in Bellwood had mercury levels more than six times the level accepted by health officials over an eight-hour workday, said state EPA spokesman Dennis McMurray.

Outside, in a fenced area around a trash bin, the reading was found to be almost 25 times the accepted indoor levels. Inside the trash bin, the mercury reading was found to be about 40 times the allowable indoor level.

A fenced area outside Nicor's Crestwood service center where mercury-filled containers were held for recycling had almost 25 times the occupational standard for indoor exposure, McMurray said. That center is at 4829 W. 135th St.

Officials were not sure whether higher levels of mercury would be relatively safer outdoors. But state Environmental Protection Agency officials were troubled by the results.

"We had hoped to not find mercury in any of the service centers ... because that's an indication they didn't clean up properly," said Tom Skinner, director of the state EPA.

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"It's disappointing to find that it's there."

Skinner said a cleanup would be relatively simple because "the stuff is contained in identifiable locations."

It was unclear how many Nicor workers or company contractors came into contact with the areas, particularly the outdoor areas, McMurray said.

All those questions will become part of an investigation by local, state and federal regulators.

Environmental officials said that they notified Nicor of their findings Saturday night, and that Nicor was planning its own tests and, if necessary, any cleanup.

"Certainly, if we need to tighten up our procedures, we'll do that," said Lee Haines, a Nicor spokesman. "That's part of what we're looking into."

Saturday's findings were the result of a sweep by federal and state environmental officials prompted by the discovery Thursday of spilled mercury at a Chicago Heights scrap yard where old meters had been discarded.

Nicor conceded Friday that it had failed to empty some of the mercury-filled gas pressure regulators before they were discarded.

Testing of another 10 scrap yards is expected to continue Tuesday, EPA officials said, and about six more Nicor service centers also are scheduled for inspections later in the week.

Law-enforcement agencies are working with environmental officials to determine when Nicor became aware of contamination problems and whether they disclosed them properly to authorities.

Richard Stock, chief of staff for the Illinois attorney general's office, said that over the long weekend, lawyers will review documents turned over by Nicor, including company policies, training manuals and work logs.

"The bottom line is, Nicor needs to pull its act together, and they have to do it quick," Stock said.

Bill Muno, a regional Superfund director with the U.S. EPA, said Saturday that the federal agency might take action to force the Naperville-based



utility to expedite cleanup at the Chicago Heights site.

That effort "will not be a major undertaking, but [mercury contamination] is not something that should have occurred," Munoz said. "It's very clear there is a problem at Chicago Heights, and we need to have that material removed."

Nicor hasn't installed gas-pressure regulators that contain mercury since 1961. At least 200,000 of the meters have been removed from suburban homes since then, and Nicor is inspecting those homes after a homeowner found mercury spilled in his basement where a meter had been removed. Traces of mercury have since been found in dozens of suburban homes.


Beginning Tuesday, 15,000 customers whose meters were removed from their homes within the last five years will be inspected. The company said it hopes to complete inspections of all 200,000 homes within six months.

Over time, exposure to even small amounts of mercury can cause permanent damage to the brain, kidneys, lungs and developing fetuses.

Once the liquid metal, sometimes called quicksilver, enters the body, it can take months before it is eliminated. Mercury commonly has been used in consumer pressure-sensing products, such as thermometers.

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**What We're Doing • Am I Affected? • Mercury Facts • Media Information • Contac**

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[Press releases](#)

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**Corrections and clarifications**

*Updated Friday, Sept. 1, 2000, at 6:00 p.m.*

A list of towns which have homes that will be tested has been added to the "Am I Affected?" page. [Click here to see the list.](#)

*Updated Thursday, Aug. 31, 2000, at noon.*

Yesterday, Nicor Gas had 17 inspection and clean-up crews working and will be staffing up to 150 crews in the coming weeks. It was incorrectly reported that we had eight people in the field and would be staffing up to 150 people.

Nicor Gas has pledged to complete the highest priority inspections in four months and the balance in six months, not in excess of six months, as was reported this morning.

Inspections of homes in the expanded group to be screened considered highest priority - those in which work was done less than five years ago - will begin September 11 because a large volume of monitoring units will take a little time to receive from the vendor. Additionally, employees who will be part of the inspection teams need to be trained to use the instruments and screening procedures.

All homes that meet the screening criteria, not just selected homes within that group, will be screened for mercury using a vapor analyzer. For homes in which work was done less than five years ago, this device will be used on our visit to the customer. For homes in which work was done more than five years ago, an initial screening visit will consist of a visual inspection (visits began today) and will be followed by another screening visit at a later date with a vapor analyzer.

The Mercury Hotline phone number is 1 888 288-8110

Old style regulators contain two teaspoons of mercury, not two tablespoons.

200,000 homes may need screenings. It was reported that 200,000 homes may be affected by mercury.

**Press releases**

September 1, 2000: [Media Alert](#)

August 30, 2000: [Nicor Gas announces two-phased plan to inspect up to 200,000 homes.](#)

August 30, 2000: [Nicor Gas will hold a press briefing at its corporate headquarters to update the media on its mercury investigation.](#)

August 26, 2000: [Nicor Gas Expands Mercury Home Inspections Plan](#)

August 26, 2000: [Nicor Gas Launches Web Site to Address Mercury Concerns](#)

August 18, 2000: [Nicor Gas Initiates Additional Quality Inspections](#)

**More information**

Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR)

<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/toxfaq.html> - Home

<http://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/tfacts46.html> - Mercury facts

Illinois Department of Public Health

For medical information: 1 888 522-1282

<http://www.idph.state.il.us> - Home

<http://www.idph.state.il.us/envhealth/factsheets/mercuryspills.htm> - Mercury Fact Sheet

Lutheran General Hospital

<http://www.advocatehealth.com/sites/hospitals/luth/index.html> - Home

Provena Mercy Center in Aurora

<http://www.provenamercy.com/> - Home

Environmental Protection Agency

<http://www.epa.gov> - Home

Nicor Gas Mercury Information Line: 1 888 288-8110

**Media contacts:**

Nicor Gas, 630 983-8676

Lee Haines, ext. 2604

Jane Wiedmeyer, ext. 2844

After hours: Call 1 888 Nicor4u (1 888 642-6748) You'll get our auto attendant, press 1 for emergencies and tell our customer care representative that you'd like one of us called at home or paged and we'll get back to you ASAP.

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# Gas meter removal results in toxic mercury spills USA 8/31/00

## Chicago gas utility monitors for leaks from replacing old gauges

By Julie Appleby  
USA TODAY

Worried Chicago-area residents got details Wednesday of a plan to screen up to 200,000 homes for toxic mercury — stemming from a gas company's effort to remove old pressure meters.

A task force of federal and state officials is overseeing the cleanup, while utilities nationwide are paying close attention and reviewing their own meter-removal records.

The problem in Chicago surfaced in July, when a homeowner called Nicor Gas to report finding a pool of silvery liquid. At the time, Nicor was replacing

old gas meters and pressure regulators inside homes with outdoor models.

Only pre-1961 pressure regulators are of concern, as some contained mercury. The toxic metal is sealed inside the devices, which are safe while intact. But mercury can escape if the device leaks or is improperly removed.

Short exposures to mercury are generally not harmful, but, long term, the metal can cause brain and kidney damage, particularly when it vaporizes.

Many gas companies replaced the old-style meters during the past couple of decades, but there are no accurate counts of how many remain.

Nationally, it is not the first time removal programs have resulted in spills.

► In Pennsylvania in 1995, a gas utility worker spilled mercury in a basement; it was discovered by the homeowner three months later. By then, the

## ► About the old-style gas meter, how to get your home tested, 2B

mercury had been tracked through the home. The EPA and other agencies were called in. Ultimately, the home and its entire contents had to be destroyed. None of the other homes on the block, which were also part of the meter-replacement effort, were affected.

► The New York State Department of Health says half of the mercury spills in homes from 1992 to 1997 occurred during utility company work on gas meters or regulators.

At first, Nicor said the only homes at risk were a few hundred whose meters were replaced by subcontractor Henkels & McCoy, one of the nation's largest construction and engineering firms. But

over the weekend, Nicor discovered a mercury-contaminated home whose gas regulator had been replaced by Nicor's workers in 1989.

That prompted Nicor to expand its screening to 200,000 homes, with priority to 15,000 where meters were replaced in the last five years. By Wednesday, 46 homes of 322 tested were found with higher-than-normal mercury levels. Several families have been evacuated; 10 homeowners have filed a lawsuit against Nicor and its contractor.

Nationally, other utilities are reviewing records to check whether they ever used mercury-containing meters — and whether those meters were removed. Reliant Energy Minnegasco in Minneapolis is typical: "We're trying to find out what's going on in Chicago and whether this is even an issue for us," says spokesman Al Swintek.

## Nicor screens homes for spills, 1B



**Old meters:** Mercury-containing pressure regulators and gas meters used in the Chicago area generally were mounted horizontally inside homes, often in basements.

## Should you worry? Here's what to do

Nicor Gas in Chicago and other utilities used mercury-containing pressure regulators in gas meters in some homes built before 1961. Many of the devices have since been replaced. In the removal process, however, some spills of the toxic metal have occurred. If you have concerns about mercury-containing utility devices, here's what you can do:

- 1. Call your power company. Ask if it ever used mercury-containing pressure regulators inside homes. Generally, only homes serviced by high-pressure gas lines used the devices.
- 2. If you have such a meter or it was removed, ask your utility whether it is conducting tests for mercury. Some experts advise testing if a child or pregnant woman was living in the home at the time of removal.
- 3. State departments of health may be able to test your home or tell you who can do testing.
- 4. If you discover mercury, which is a silvery liquid, call the EPA, health department or local poison control center. Do not use a vacuum to remove it, as that will vaporize the metal and make it more dangerous.



## c is gaining popularity in suburbs

said Tuesday.

Authorities, though, could not specify that Anderson died of a heroin overdose. In Anderson's case, blood tests could not distinguish which opiate — a group of narcotics that includes codeine,

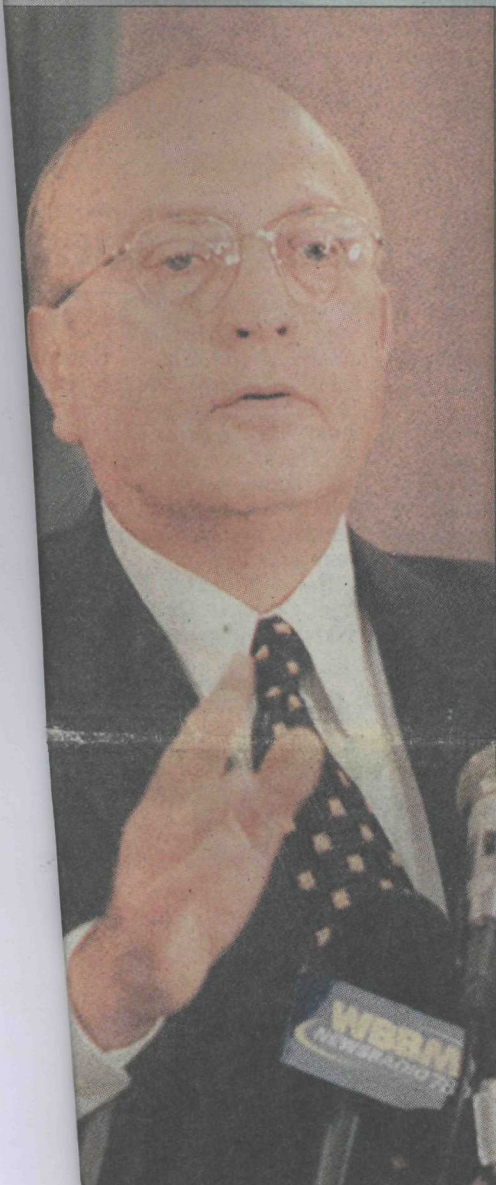
heroin and morphine — was present because it had chemically broken down too far to trace. "He used one of those three," the medical examiner's spokesman said.

Police said he'd been arrested downtown in Arlington Heights in

May for possession of drug paraphernalia — small plastic bags that had contained heroin.

Anderson's death, along with that of Ryan Fried, 17, of Buffalo Grove, are indicators of a growth in heroin use by suburban teenagers, substance abuse coun-

See **HEROIN** on Page 4



...i, head of an Illinois State Crime  
...ion team evaluating a report  
...the Brown's Chicken Task  
...ys the report is "without merit."

Daily Herald Photo/Daniel White

### ies

Palatine officials ask Illinois State Crime Commission to examine BGA report.

**August 1998** — Crime lab compares fingerprints of Colorado man, in this area at the time of the murders, with prints recovered from the murder scene.

**April 2000** — News that investigators continue to collect DNA samples from test or possible suspects raises hope at the case is solvable.

**August 2000** — Study sharply rebuts A report's conclusions.

Source: Daily Herald news reports

## Mt. Prospect and Lombard families sue over mercury

By **ERIC KROL**  
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Chris Denver was fumbling around for a screwdriver in the basement of his brick ranch home in Mount Prospect last month when he noticed a dime-sized drop of mercury on a piece of scrap paper.

As he looked for a bowl or box to dispose of the dangerous material, Denver spied something else on a storage shelf: a crucible containing traces of mercury, left there a week earlier, Denver says, by the contractor Nicor hired to remove the old regulator attached to his gas meter.

By the end of that evening, July 20, Denver had evacuated his wife, Laura, their two toddlers and two dogs on advice from the Illinois Department of Public Health. They haven't been able to return since, staying with relatives as they wait for answers.

"It's as if the house burned down. We've lost everything," said Denver, adding that environmental consultants he's talked to say he'll never be able to live in his house again. "We've been in a holding pattern for 40 days with no communication at Nicor from someone who can make a decision."

The Denvers joined nine other families from Mount Prospect, Lombard and Park Ridge Tuesday in suing Nicor and its contractor, Pennsylvania-based Henkels & McCoy, for the damage the mercury spills caused. The suit was filed in Cook County Circuit Court.

A Nicor spokesman declined to comment on the suit, and Henkels could not be reached for comment.

The suit came as Nicor continued to draft its response plan to possible mercury contamination at scores of suburban homes and met for two hours behind closed doors with Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan to explain what led to its decision last weekend to start testing 200,000 suburban homes. Nicor says the homes that will be tested have had meters replaced or removed in the last five years.

The families who sued live on Elmhurst Road in Mount Prospect and Woodland, Grace and Grove streets in Lombard.

All of the homes tested positive for mercury contamination. Four of the families had mercury tracked into their homes, while six had meters moved, and none of the 10 families are able to live in their homes, said Shawn S. Kasserman, an attorney with Chicago's high-profile Corboy & Demetrio firm.

Kasserman also said some of his clients have displayed symptoms of memory loss, peeling skin and nausea. Two are pregnant women, who are more susceptible to mercury's effects.

Denver said he and his wife have had headaches, muscle spasms and forgetfulness since the meter was removed. The skin on their feet also is peeling after walking barefoot in the basement, he said.

Nicor is paying for blood and urine tests, and the Illinois Department of Public Health said Monday that results which have come back so far show only one person out of 10 with an elevated level of mercury.

In other developments Tuesday, Attorney General Ryan said Nicor agreed to mail warning notices this week to the 200,000 homes and include a letter from the state health department.

Ryan also said Nicor promised to finish all 200,000 environmental screenings in three to six months. Ryan said he is pushing Nicor to narrow that time frame. He also admitted Nicor still hasn't answered many of his

See **MERCURY** on Page 4



"We have to let people know that Des Plaines is going to take a stand on rentals and overcrowding," he said. "As far as I'm concerned, it's a problem."

The proposed regulations, which include increases in penalties, will come before the city council Sept. 18, 4th Ward Alderman Dick Sayad said.

Sayad and Elstner said they've heard from residents in their wards about cases of several families living in the same

cer also near certain, minor housing-related tickets, such as parking tickets.

Now those kinds of complaints are heard in the Cook County courthouse in Skokie.

D'Onofrio said he would have to research whether city codes about rental properties also would apply to single-family homes. Sayad and Elstner, two-thirds of the city's building code committee, said they'd like to see higher penalties, particularly for repeat offenders.

Board chairman  
"In short, the Association's are not based  
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## MERCURY: Some residents noticing typical symptoms

*Continued from Page 1*

questions.

"It is not clear to me at this point what training, if any, these contractors received before they were employed by Nicor," said Ryan, who has asked the company for copies of its contract with Henkels.

Nicor plans to hold a press conference today to spell out the details of its response plan.

Those with questions about mercury contamination can call the state health department hotline at (888) 522-1282 or Nicor at (888) 288-8110.

Denver, meanwhile, said he continues to wait for a response from Nicor.

"The thing that was most difficult was watching them throw out all of my children's birthday and Christmas toys, bag by bag," he said. "That has the most sentimental value, because we watched them as we gave (the gifts) to them."

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# Gas utilities reach out

*Giant public awareness campaign being planned by companies to combat mercury-exposure scare*

BY MAUREEN O'DONNELL  
STAFF REPORTER

Many of the nation's biggest natural gas companies are planning public awareness campaigns to allay consumer fears in the wake of a mercury-exposure scare sparked by regulators used by Illinois' Nicor Gas.

The American Gas Association reports many of its members—utilities that supply 90 percent of all natural gas delivered

in the United States—"have indicated that they intend to renew their outreach to customers" about old-style, mercury-filled regulators attached to gas meters.

Nicor's planned inspections of as many as 200,000 Chicago area homes is so sweeping that officials at the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency could remember no other environmental screening as large. The EPA "isn't aware of any other thing of this magnitude," said a spokeswoman in Washington.

Many of the nation's gas utilities are considering the use of mailed inserts or Web sites to publicize the existence of old-style regulators that might contain mercury. Some might offer "bounties" to help locate them, said Daphne Magnuson of the American Gas Association in Wash-

## TRACES FOUND

**As of Monday, Nicor found no traces of mercury in homes in these suburbs:** Arlington Heights, Barrington, Bensenville, Brookfield, Elmhurst, Huntley, La Grange, McHenry, Ottawa and Villa Park.

**Nicor found mercury traces in homes in these suburbs:** Aurora, Lombard, Mount Prospect, Park Forest and Park Ridge.

ington, D.C. The association represents gas utilities serving 55 million American homes, businesses and factories.

"They want to make sure they can allay any customer fears" and will communicate, "If you

have it, let us take it out," Magnuson said.

The old regulators were in widespread use across the country after World War II, but neither the gas association nor the EPA have any idea how many are still in existence.

Those regulators stopped being manufactured in the early 1960s. Removal programs have been going on since the 1970s, not because of concerns about mercury, but because of decisions to install more modern equipment, Magnuson said. "Removing the mercury was a bonus," she said. "We believe a large percentage [of old regulators] were replaced in the '70s and '80s."

Outdoor meters, as well as meters in homes built after 1961, are safe.

Nicor officials aren't sure about committing to removing all

the old-style regulators, said spokesman Lee Haines. "Really, they work just fine the way they are," he said. "Where we have found traces of mercury is where there has been a [regulator] removal."

The problem came to light after a Nicor subcontractor apparently spilled mercury on a basement floor while removing an old meter.

For questions on whether your home should be inspected, call Nicor at (888) 288-8110. People with health concerns can phone the state Public Health Department at (888) 522-1282.

Peoples Gas, which supplies natural gas inside the Chicago city limits, does not use regulators that contain mercury. Neither does North Shore Gas, which supplies gas to 54 northeastern Illinois suburbs.

# Contamination disrupts neighborhood

BY GARY WISBY  
ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

Neither rain, nor snow, nor gloom of night—and now, better



WHEN IS



# Contamination disrupts neighborhood

BY GARY WISBY  
ENVIRONMENT REPORTER

Neither rain, nor snow, nor gloom of night—and now, better add mercury contamination to the list of perils a postman faces.

Richard Poteracki, longtime letter carrier on Brophy Street in Park Ridge, stopped by Lutheran General Hospital in the suburb Monday to pick up a urine-testing kit. He kept delivering mail on Brophy even after residents were evacuated and cleaning crews moved in.

"No one told me not to walk through the police tape," he said. "I feel it's my job to deliver their mail."

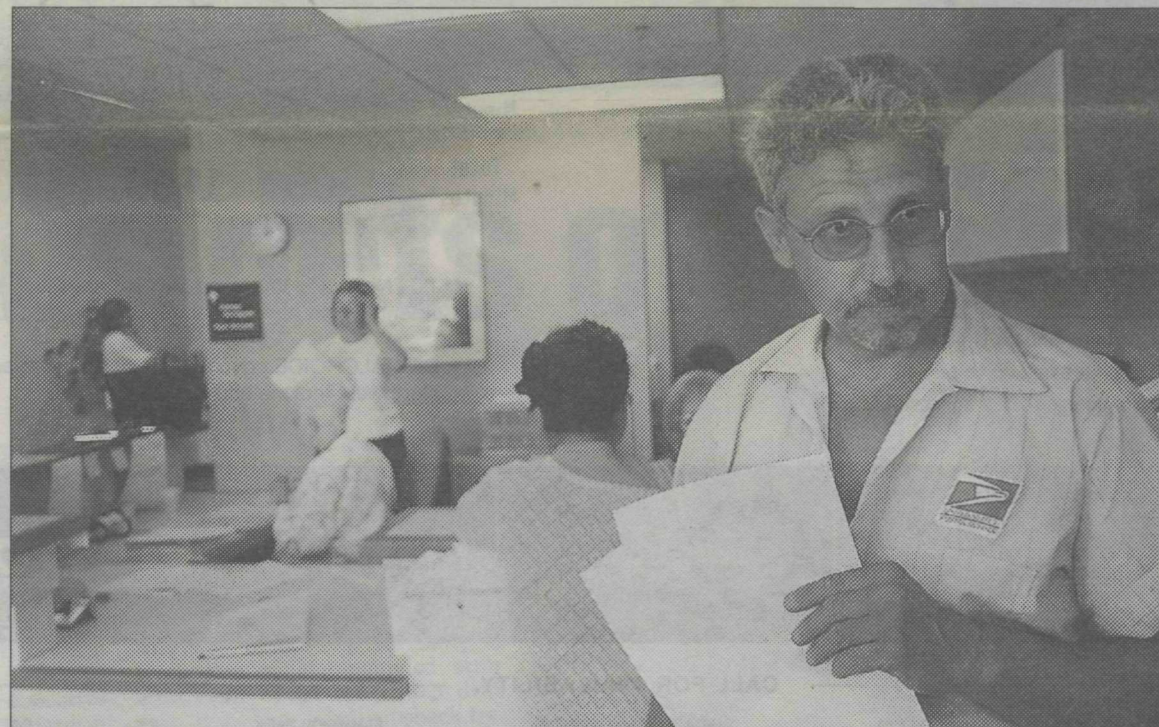
When he thought about his 25 years working every day in the neighborhood—including the times he went into homes to have letters signed for—Poteracki said, "I thought to protect my family I should get tested."

As Poteracki picked up a plastic jug for collecting a urine sample, unknown numbers of concerned residents were doing the same thing across the suburbs—one of the many ways the mercury poisoning scare has disrupted the lives of numerous families.

A Nicor spokesman, Craig Whyte, said crews also were checking gas meters for possible mercury contamination Monday in Mount Prospect, Lombard, Aurora, Glen Ellyn—wherever customers reported a potential problem.

Nicor estimates it might have to check 200,000 meters in the suburbs.

As of Monday evening, Nicor had inspected 255 suburban homes. Forty-three contained traces of mercury, 19 were cleaned and 24 had work remaining, spokesman Lee Haines said. Nicor was unable to provide numbers on how many people were relocated to hotels until cleanup was completed.



ELLEN DOMKE/SUN-TIMES

Postman Richard Poteracki picked up a mercury testing kit at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge after he became concerned about delivering mail to contaminated homes on Brophy Street in Park Ridge.

Lynn Soderlund, a Lutheran General Hospital official sitting at a curbside urine testing kit dropoff site, said 260 kits had been handed out, and 89 were collected by midafternoon.

"It's pretty nerve-racking for some people," she said. "They're angry at the lack of information, and their furniture is being moved out."

Brophy Street resident Amy Swanson came by to drop off samples from her family of six—except for her 2-year-old, Colton. "I'm counting on it being negative," she said, because the toddler would have to wear a collection device.

Swanson said some of her neighbors had tested positive. "And with the kids, you never know. They've been in a lot of the

neighbors' homes."

On Brophy Street, Luke Murchie, 19, stepped around a 4-foot-high fan in the doorway of his house. He'd been told he and his parents and his 16-year-old brother would be spending the next few days in a nearby hotel, courtesy of Nicor.

"We're not going to sue or anything," he said. "As long as they get it cleaned up, they don't need any other problems."

Karen Stanton and her husband, Michael, just happened to take off work Monday to spend the day with their daughters, 1-year-old Hannah and 6-year-old Madeline. They came home Monday afternoon to a "block party" of officials, workers, TV crews and families.

After asking officials to test

their home, traces of mercury were found in the basement.

"They should have had a lot more information on Monday," Stanton said. "[Nicor representatives] were just overwhelmed. They did not realize the scope of the problem."

Stanton said both she and her husband missed work to deal with the problem—she had to take their daughters for tests and has also made "tons" of phone calls to sort out the dangers and what she should do.

Stanton said her daughter, Madeline, is only mildly aware of what is going on, but did ask her, "Mommy, are we sleeping in the bad stuff?" and "Is it on my Barbies?"

Poteracki, the steadfast mail carrier, retained his sense of hu-

## WHEN IS CONTACT A THREAT?

Some adults might remember playing with liquid mercury in high school chemistry class or attempting to gather it up by hand after breaking a mercury thermometer.

Mercury eventually is eliminated from the body, but it can take several months, depending on concentration and duration of exposure, said Dr. Daniel Hryhorczuk, director of the Center for Children's Environmental Health at Cook County Hospital.

"I think the hazards of mercury weren't appreciated by the public years ago," he said. "It's an ancient poison, and the toxicity of mercury has been known for centuries, but in terms of public awareness of the potential hazards, that's newer or more recent."

"Playing with it as children, a short-term exposure like that doesn't pose much of a hazard unless it's a huge amount," he said.

Absorption through the skin occurs slowly. Absorption through inhalation of mercury vapors happens much more quickly.

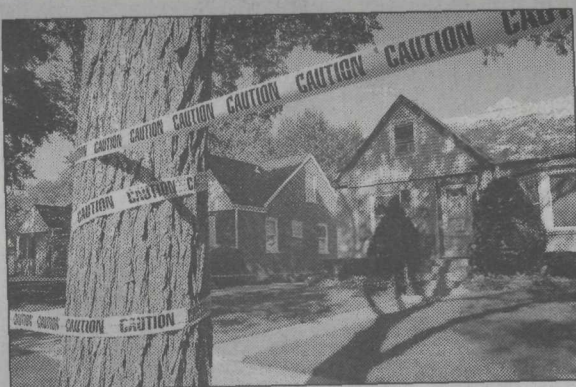
Maureen O'Donnell

mor. He said he has been bitten by 13 dogs over the years, adding, "I hope they weren't licking up mercury in the basement."

Contributing: Annie Sweeney



# Nicor awaits cleanup tally for mercury



Tribune photos by Nuccio DiNuzzo

Workers at a Park Ridge home on Brophy Avenue carry away bags full of items contaminated by mercury. Several families on Brophy have been evacuated, and yellow caution tape (top) marks a contaminated home.

## Company to take days to expand tests to thousands of residences.

By Evan Osnos  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

As mercury cleanup crews return Monday to more than a dozen suburban neighborhoods, residents can do little but wonder if their furniture, toys or heirlooms will be found to be contaminated and carted away.

After disclosing over the weekend that as many as 200,000 homes may face mercury inspections to see if the dangerous substance was spilled when Nicor gas meters were replaced, Nicor said Sunday it could offer no new information until Wednesday.

By then, the company promises it will know which homes need to be tested and how the testing will unfold. In the meantime, residents have little choice but to watch as crews look for the tell-tale silvery mercury beads or traces of mercury vapor.

"The waiting is difficult. Not knowing is hard," said Celso Mendoza, 54, who has an old gas meter in the basement of his Mt. Prospect home. "I know a lot of people are concerned about this. I just want to find out if I have any problems."

For Tom Carmody, one of several Park Ridge residents



A homeowner has left his own message at this Brophy Avenue residence, where mercury contamination was contained in the basement.

who lost mounds of contaminated possessions last week, finding out hardly offered relief.

"They had to tear out cabinets and work benches that

took me two years to build," said Carmody. "[Nicor] said it will compensate me for everything. But it's the time you lost that you can't get back."

"Above all, I'm worried

about my wife and five cats."

Questions about mercury contamination in some of Nicor's 1.9 million customers emerged a month ago when workers for a contractor were discovered to have spilled the silvery metal while removing 50-year-old gas meters that include a mercury-bearing regulator. As Nicor checked 53 homes handled by that contractor, officials discovered on Aug. 25 that another home, serviced by a Nicor technician, had also been tainted.

Nicor has now promised to check every home that still holds a mercury-bearing gas meter or where one has been removed. The company, which serves suburban Illinois from the Wisconsin border down to Bloomington, does not yet know if some communities will face a greater number of inspections than others.

"We will know by Wednesday exactly what we're looking at," said Nicor spokesman Lee Haines. "Until then, we're still putting it all together."

Officials with Peoples Energy, which serves the city of Chicago, say they do not anticipate similar problems because three-quarters of their customers use a low-pressure system that does not require in-home regulator. The remaining customers have regulators that do not use mercury, said a Peoples spokesman.

The mercury spills in Nicor homes occurred during a 2-year-old campaign to replace the older, indoor gas meters with ones that can be read

SEE MERCURY, PAGE 2

# study says O'Hare hikes cancer risks

## Toxic fallout reaches across area, it finds

By Noreen S. Ahmed-Ullah  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITER

At times, planes fly barely 500 feet above the Park Ridge home of Carrie Sasenick, sometimes every 20 seconds. On hazy days, she said there is a kerosene-type odor. And she blames jet engines for a black film on plants, patio furniture, windows and cars.

So a study released Sunday, which suggests that toxic emissions at O'Hare International Airport pose cancer risks to 98 Chicago area communities—some as far away as Lake County—came as no surprise.

It confirms long-held beliefs by Sasenick and her neighbors that the heavy traffic overhead is a health hazard.

"I believe it because we see it with our own eyes and we hear it with our own ears," said Sasenick, 61.

Commissioned by Park Ridge—which opposes expansion at the airport—the study suggests the risk of getting cancer exceeds the federal goal of 1 cancer in 1 million people in communities beyond the inner ring, including North Shore suburbs, Chicago's Northwest Side and villages such as Hillside and Burr Ridge.

In inner-ring communities such as Des Plaines and Park Ridge, the report states the risk of getting cancer is worse—10 times the federal guidelines.

"O'Hare Airport is the No. 1 toxic polluter in the state of Illinois," said Park Ridge Mayor Ron Witek at the news conference.

Because of the emission "widespread impact," the report opposes expansion at O'Hare, not-so-surprising conclusion given that Park Ridge is a member of the Suburban O'Hare Commi-

SEE O'HARE, PAGE 2

## Restrictions on fare cause foul feelings

Selma Milne's family acknowledges that the 84-year-old Arizona woman's fear of flying on a smaller commercial plane known as regional jets, is a tad irrational.

But they insist it is the airline industry's restriction-laden fare structure that makes no sense.

Milne and her husband, Frank, 89, who can no longer drive in Wisconsin, flew from Phoenix to Madison on July 29 for a three-

## Getting around Jon Hilkevitch

week visit with relatives.

The ride to O'Hare International Airport aboard an American Airlines MD-Super 80 was fine, but Selma Milne had a serious anxiety attack during connecting flight to Madison on a 50-seat regional jet.

The symptoms included numbness of both her legs.

"The very small plane scared me dearly," said Mrs. Milne, who was taken off the American Airlines plane in a wheelchair and the captain radioed ahead for assistance.

We're happy to report that

SEE TICKETS, PAGE 2



**Focused on the finish:** Michelle Palmisano of San Diego gets ready to start the bike-riding portion of the Mrs. T's Chicago Triathlon along the lakefront on Sunday. Palmisano finished 25th among 70 professional triathletes and more than 5,000 non-professionals in the competition that includes swimming, running and bike riding. The triathlon makes its debut next month at the Summer Olympics in Sydney. Michellie Jones of Australia won the pro women's competition.

## Mercury

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

from outside. Haines said the older models, which contain about two tablespoons of elemental mercury, do not present any inherent risk but the company plans to inspect them to ease customer concerns.

Nicor has ruled out the possibility of mercury exposure for most of its customers. Those include homes built after 1961, after mercury regulators were no longer installed; homes with regulators on the outside; and all homes in the company's low-pressure distribution system area.

That area includes portions of many different communities, Haines said. Customers can find out if they are included by calling Nicor's mercury hot line at 888-288-8110.

In small amounts, mercury can cause serious health effects in humans and animals. Long-term exposure can affect the brain, kidney and lungs, as well as harm a developing fetus.

Officials at Lutheran General Hospital in Park Ridge, one of the

earliest communities found to be exposed, said Sunday they had given out 160 kits for at-home urine tests. Results are expected by the end of the week.

The home inspections entail a 10-minute screening by a crew using a hand-held monitor to detect traces of mercury vapor. If mercury is detected in the air, or as tiny beads on floors, the area is sealed with plastic. Crews then scour the contaminated area with a special vacuum, wash it and seal it with an epoxy paint.

The house is then heated to vaporize any remaining mercury and ventilated with huge fans.

By mid-afternoon Sunday, 214 homes had been tested and 40 had been found to be contaminated. In some cases, the exposure was confined to the basement, but in others, residents moved to hotels.

Haines said Nicor will likely expand its screening operation to perform the thousands of inspections. He could not predict when the expanded operation would begin.

"That's part of what we're looking at, is what kind of staffing will take to do this. We want to get it done as quickly as possible," he said.

## Let Those Who Care Know...

For more information or to place a death notice, call (312) 222-2222. Or, fax your information to (312) 222-4014

Chicago Tribune  
chicagotribune.com



# Nicor blames spill on subcontractor

BY DAVE NEWBART  
SUBURBAN REPORTER

The president of Nicor Gas on Wednesday blamed a subcontractor for spilling mercury in at least 32 homes in the suburbs but acknowledged his company's mistakes.

"We accept responsibility for this," said Tom Fisher, after meeting with state and federal officials, "... but it's clear the contractor did not do what it should have done."

Speaking publicly on the spills for the first time, Fisher accused the contractor—Henkles & McCoy of Pennsylvania—of failing to do its job while it removed old gas regulators from hundreds of suburban homes last year. Henkles & McCoy could not be reached.

The meeting was called by Illinois Attorney General Jim Ryan to address what he called a "public health crisis."

Ryan said a newly formed task force—including his office, the Environmental Protection Agency, the Department of Public Health and the governor's office—will hold its first meeting today.

Health officials said the low amounts of mercury some families were exposed to could cause chronic health problems but added that it was unlikely.

Fisher, head of the largest gas

## SOME FACTS ABOUT MERCURY

### Mercury's properties:

☐ Mercury is a shiny, silver-white, odorless liquid that becomes a colorless, odorless gas if heated.

### Exposure:

☐ Mercury exposure occurs by breathing contaminated air. Low-level exposure to certain forms of mercury can cause neurological damage, psychological problems and irritability. High-level exposure can permanently damage the brain, kidneys and a developing fetus.

### Signs of exposure:

☐ The first indication of exposure to mercury could be muscle or eye twitches because it affects the nervous system. Another sign is the loss of fine motor skills, such as being able to thread a needle.

### How to handle it:

☐ Mercury-containing products such as thermometers or fluorescent light bulbs should be handled carefully. Mercury should not be removed with a vacuum because it will vaporize and increase exposure.

### For more information:

Call the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry Information Center at (888) 422-8737 or look it up on the Internet: [www.ATSDR.cdc.gov/tfacts46.html](http://www.ATSDR.cdc.gov/tfacts46.html)

Contributing: Associated Press

utility in the state, said his company learned of the problem July 20. It immediately began to look at the work of Henkles & McCoy, which was hired to move the gas

regulators outside the homes. The regulators contain about 1 to 2 teaspoons of mercury, officials said.

After Nicor found contamina-

tion in 12 homes in Lombard and Mount Prospect, it broadened its search last week to include 75 homes in 11 suburbs. Fisher said the subcontractor worked in at least 161 homes. Of the 108 that have been inspected, 32 were contaminated. Of those, 15 families have been evacuated by Nicor, and two have left on their own.

Fisher said Nicor is reviewing its records to determine if there are other homes where the contractor worked. And secondary contamination could be a problem: Officials know of at least one instance where mercury was tracked into another home by someone living in

a contaminated home.

Nicor plans to reimburse residents for medical tests, temporary housing and any furniture or carpeting removed during the cleanups, which have lasted between two days and 2½ weeks.

Even though Fisher blamed the contractor, which he said should have been qualified to remove the regulators, he admitted that his inspectors failed to detect the spills. That meant the mercury could have remained in homes for a year or more.

"We would have caught it earlier" if they had done a better job, he said.

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## Condos & Lofts & Townhomes

Welfare families may need housing aid



# MetroChicago

News from  
**CHICAGO**  
and the North  
and near West Suburbs

TUESDAY, AUGUST 22, 2000 ■ SECTION 2

## Mixed messages on mercury mess

By Maria T. Galo  
and Elizabeth Neff  
TRIBUNE STAFF WRITERS

Outrage grew Monday among some Park Ridge residents and officials as orange-shirted environmental workers cordoned off and, in some cases, encased in plastic 40 homes suspected of mercury contamination from faulty gas meter installations.

Naperville-based Nicor gas

### Nicor angers Park Ridge residents, officials

company began last Wednesday to clean up homes where a contractor hired to update aging gas meters spilled mercury inside residents' basements. So far the company has detected only "low levels" of mercury, said Nicor spokesman Lee Haines.

Up to 87 homes in 11 suburbs could be effected by mercury

spills, the gas company said.

Last month Nicor cleaned 12 contaminated houses in Mt. Prospect and Lombard. This week, in addition to the homes in Park Ridge, the company expects to start cleaning 20 houses in Aurora. The remaining 15 houses are scattered around the suburbs, Haines said.

Nicor officials said two families were evacuated from their Park Ridge homes, and Monday night two other families also said they had left their homes during the cleanup.

Park Ridge officials said the company has not been forthcoming about the cleanup.

Park Ridge Mayor Ron Wiete-

cha said Nicor officials told the city the situation is not serious.

"It's strange. If there is nothing to worry about, why move people out?" the mayor said.

Ald. Paul Hansen, who represents the 7th Ward, which contains many of the affected houses, said, "I'm just really, really surprised that contamination of this level, with this frequency, would

SEE MERCURY, PAGE 2







Tribune photo by Jim Prisching

Environmental worker Mike Hobsen throws debris in a trash bin outside the Levy home, where a small amount of mercury was found Wednesday. It leaked from an old gas meter that was improperly replaced.

## Mercury

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

be handled so routinely by Nicor without informing the public safety officials involved."

But with no reports so far of mercury poisonings, the Nicor spokesman said the company didn't want to panic the public.

"People don't need to be real concerned, but I don't want to minimize it," Haines said.

The only homes affected are those whose aging indoor meters that use mercury were switched to outdoor meters, he said.

Nicor on Monday declined to identify the contractor who spilled the mercury until the gas company had completed an internal investigation of the mercury spills, Haines said. The company had contracted work from Nicor for the last two years, Haines said.

Park Ridge resident Darlene Serrano, who said she left her home and checked into a local hotel Monday morning, filed a \$1 million lawsuit against the gas company, alleging negligence on the part of Nicor and its contractors.

At a news conference in front of her home in Park Ridge, Serrano, 52, said she felt victimized.

"I really trusted that they knew what they were doing and that they

were doing it safely," she said.

Mercury, commonly called quicksilver, was used in gas meters 50 years ago to control the flow of natural gas into homes, Haines said.

The metal is poisonous and can be absorbed by inhaling its vapors, said Leslie Morrow, environmental toxicologist with the Illinois Environmental Protection Agency. It can cause neurological damage, including facial twitches and loss of control over fine motor movements, depending on the amount of mercury involved and the duration of the exposure, Morrow said.

All 40 Park Ridge homeowners who had work performed by the contractor had been notified of a possible mercury leak, said Nicor spokeswoman Janelle Jones. Out of the 40 Park Ridge homes, 33 had been tested, and mercury vapor was detected in 11, officials said. Only one of the 11 homes had been cleaned by Monday.

The company did not immediately have figures on how many of its 1.9 million customers in the suburbs continue to use the older meters, Haines said. But he said the company had tracked down all 87 homes with old meters that the contractor had worked on.

"We feel like we've identified the homes that really need to be inspected," Haines said.

But as a precaution, Haines said the company is recommending that

customers get urine tests if they are worried about mercury exposure.

The older meters use a 1950s-era technology in which about 2 tablespoons of elemental mercury is used to control the flow of natural gas to the home, Haines said. After the late 1950s, the mercury-regulated meters were no longer used, Haines said.

While removing the meters, the contractor spilled some mercury, Haines said.

The troubles began almost two years ago when a contractor started removing older, indoor gas meters and replacing them with newer, outdoor meters, Haines said.

But the spills didn't come to light until last month, when a Mt. Prospect family noticed a silvery liquid in their basement, Haines said. Nicor crews identified the substance as mercury.

South Brophy Avenue is home to many families with young children.

Peggy Barrett and her husband, Pat Carey, waited on their Brophy Avenue driveway Monday afternoon for a worker who was already 30 minutes late to test their home.

"We want to know that if there is a problem and how will we know it's been properly fixed," Barrett said.

Tribune staff writer Jennifer Peltz contributed to this report.

## Arv

By James J. ...  
TRIBUNE STA

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TRIBUNE STA

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## Intruder

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A follow-up report

a multipronged plan to target chron-  
ic drunken and unsafe drivers that  
White will detail at news confer-

ences in Chicago and Springfield.

Timing his announcement in ad-  
vance of Labor Day weekend when  
many drunken driving arrests typi-  
cally occur, Democrat White also  
will propose that anyone convicted  
a third time of driving under the  
influence of alcohol or drugs be

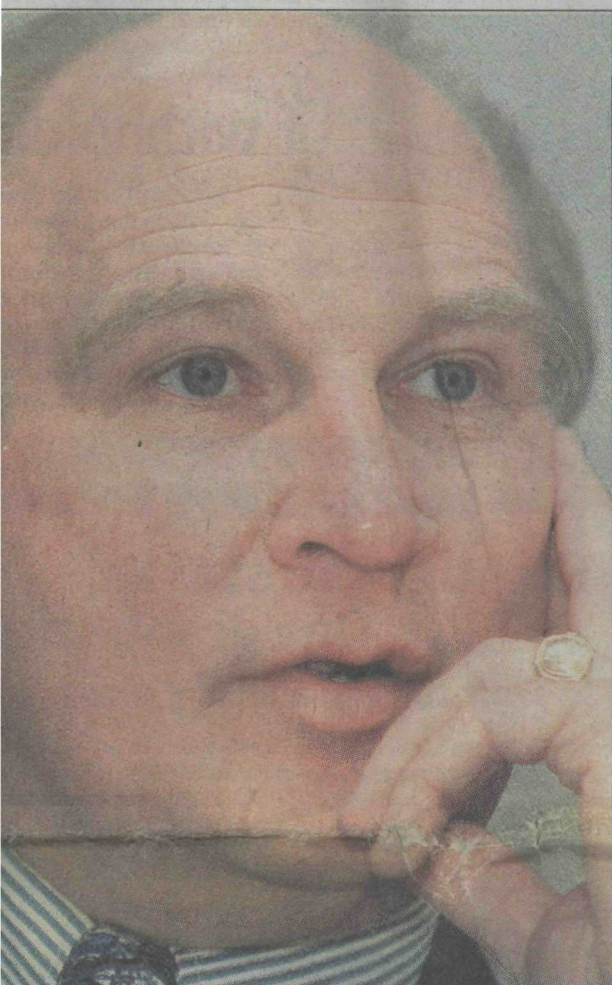
for the rest of their lives.

Those caught driving without the  
Breathalyzer device would lose driv-  
ing privileges for life. Those con-  
victed of a fourth DUI after Jan. 1,  
1999, already have their driving  
privileges revoked permanently.

"These are some tough sanc-

See DUI on Page 6

# and enemy



## Robert L. Breuder

■ **Education:**  
Bachelor's and  
master's  
degrees from  
State University  
of New York at  
Albany.  
Doctorate in  
higher education  
administration  
at Florida State  
University.

■ **Previous  
employment:**  
President of  
Pennsylvania  
College of  
Technology  
for 17 years.  
Also a district  
provost at  
Brevard Com-  
munity College  
in Cocoa, Fla.

"I see him  
as a strong  
leader, and  
strong  
leaders are  
going to  
be called  
something  
like (contro-  
versial)."

—Trustee  
Barbara Barton

President Robert Breuder is admired by some for  
y leadership style, yet in a recent survey only 18  
of the faculty gave him a satisfactory rating.

referendum attempt

the April 1999 referen-  
re's been a tendency  
er's actions, words  
to steal the spotlight  
the college embarks  
r project.  
ed during that 1999

referendum campaign, when  
the college sought \$125 million  
for renovations and construc-  
tion of two buildings on the  
Palatine campus. The referen-  
dum lost by a 3-2 ratio.

Now there are quiet discus-

See HARPER on Page 4

## 's tenure

### School parking

■ Breuder floats an idea in  
November 1998 to charge stu-  
dents and staff for parking. Pro-  
ceeds would pay for \$300,000  
worth of parking lot repairs. After  
a public outcry, Breuder agrees  
to look for alternative funding.

### College competition

■ Breuder upsets leaders of  
Roosevelt University's Schaum-  
burg campus in March 1999  
with his proposal to have four-  
year universities set up shop  
on Harper's Palatine campus.

### New job

■ Breuder surprises faculty in  
August 1999 by applying for  
president's job at Valencia Com-  
munity College in Orlando, Fla.,  
after only 18 months at Harper.  
He later tells the staff that he  
was "obliged" to look at such an  
opportunity.

### Survey says ...

■ The full-time faculty evaluate  
Breuder anonymously in May.  
Only 17.7 percent of those  
surveyed believe he's doing a  
satisfactory job.

# Nicor begins visual checks for mercury

## Detailed home screenings may not start for a week as crews are assembled

By MICK ZAWISLAK  
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Nicor today expanded its investigation into possible  
mercury contamination, but detailed checks of 15,000  
homes considered a priority may not begin for more  
than a week.

Nicor CEO Tom Fisher on Wednesday announced a  
two-pronged identification and cleanup plan for homes  
where mercury may have been spilled when old  
meters were replaced.

But his announcement left many unanswered ques-  
tions, such as how many customers or workers may  
have been affected by mercury, and where the old  
meters were disposed.

Fisher did not identify where the targeted homes  
were, saying only  
that crews today  
would begin visual  
inspections of homes  
to determine if old  
regulators, which  
used mercury to  
monitor gas pres-  
sure, were previous-  
ly or still installed  
inside.

If not, the homes  
will be cleared. If  
visible traces of  
mercury are found,  
the company will  
clean up the toxic  
metal within two  
days. Whether resi-  
dents would have to  
move out depends  
on the extent of  
cleanup needed.

As of Wednesday  
afternoon, 348  
homes had been  
screened in at least 19 towns, with 299 testing nega-  
tive. Evidence of mercury has been found in homes in  
Lombard, Mount Prospect, Park Ridge, Aurora and  
Dixon, and many families have been forced to move  
out during cleanup.

As many as 200,000 homes could have been affected  
by mercury used in the old regulators. Many homes  
likely would need only a visual inspection, Fisher said.

"We expect a large number of our potentially affect-  
ed customers would fit into this category," he said. The  
Naperville-based company emphasized that homes  
built after 1961 are not affected, since mercury was not  
used in the modern regulators.

The second part of the plan involves a visit by Nicor  
to about 15,000 homes in which an old regulator was  
removed in the past five years. These homes include  
those with no visible signs of a mercury spill and ones  
in which the older meter is still inside. That will begin  
no later than Sept. 11.

The review of the 15,000 priority homes will include  
the use of specialized screening equipment. Fisher did



Nicor CEO Tom Fisher said  
the company is training  
staff and getting equipment  
to test up to 200,000 homes.

Daily Herald Photo/Herb Shenkin

See NICOR on Page 4

# joins nuclear age,





## LOCAL REPORT

# New fitness center in Buffalo Grove ready to open doors Friday

By AURORA AGUILAR  
Daily Herald Staff Writer

Having fully taken shape after more than a year of construction, the \$10 million Buffalo Grove Fitness Center is preparing for its Friday grand opening.

The 70,000-square-foot, state-of-the-art fitness center at Busch Grove Community Park is the joint venture of the Buffalo Grove Park District and Northwest Community Healthcare.

"We're very excited about it," Parks and Recreation Director Mike Rylko said.

Just a few months since beginning registration, the center already boasts about 2,700 members, General Manager Kathy Benzmeier said. More than 4,000 people went through the center during tours last weekend.

The fitness center provides exercise facilities for athletes of all levels and will also serve those recovering from a medical illness or injury.

For the avid athlete looking to stay in shape, a fitness floor offers the latest cardiovascular equipment, including recumbent bikes, stair steppers and treadmills.

Other areas offer a private

women's room, weight resistance machines and free weight equipment.

The Aquatic Center has a five-lane 25-meter lap pool, warm water therapy pool, whirlpool and special exercise programs.

Running enthusiasts will enjoy the center's cushioned one-twelfth-mile running track suspended over the fitness floor. Competitive athletes can play in a full-size gymnasium set up for basketball and volleyball. Other attractions include a juice bar, logo shop and massage therapy.

"It's a major milestone for Buffalo Grove," Rylko said. "It'll be a major focal point for the community."

The center joins a number of similar facilities in the area, including the Multiplex in Deerfield and the Highland Park Hospital Health and Fitness Center that is right down the street at Milwaukee Avenue and Busch Parkway.

The competition doesn't scare Highland Park, however.

"The community is big enough for both of us," said Mike Lis, executive director of the new center. "It means it brings the message of fitness into the community."

# Village's zoning board backs plan for Great Indoors store

# NICOR: 15,000 homes on priority list

Continued from Page 1

not identify the location of those homes, either, though he said residents will be notified by first-class mail this week.

The company is training staff and getting extra equipment to launch the effort, which last weekend was described as possibly encompassing 200,000 of Nicor's 1.9 million residential customers mainly in communities surrounding Chicago.

The company has not yet determined the total number of houses that will be inspected. Fisher said the company is working on how and when customers other than the initial 15,000 would be notified of the next step.

Nicor will have 17 inspection and cleanup teams out today and is working to increase that to 150, Fisher said. Vapor meters are expected to be delivered to Nicor early next week and crews will work six-day, 10-hour shifts.

The extent of the mercury exposure is unclear. "How many people

## Nicor mercury cleanup procedure

- Seal off the area with plastic.
- Inventory contaminated items.
- Clean the heating and ventilation system.
- Vacuum the contaminated area with a special mercury vacuum to remove any mercury beads.
- Demolish and remove contaminated items such as walls, carpet furniture, clothing, toys, etc.
- Vacuum the entire contaminated area again with a mercury vacuum.
- Triple wash the contaminated area with mercury detergent.
- Seal the affected area with epoxy sealant.
- Heat and ventilate the home.
- Retest. If no traces are found, the home will be cleared by the U.S. EPA. If traces are still found, the cleanup steps are repeated until mercury is no longer found.

Source: Nicor

may have been exposed, I don't think anybody knows that," said Tom Schafer, spokesman for the state public health department.

Schafer said the department so far

has received 10 test results from individuals or doctors, and just one showed a slightly higher than acceptable level of mercury.

Lutheran General Hospital in

Park Ridge has collected 135 samples but does not yet have results. It has distributed another 200 test kits.

Until last week, Nicor had blamed the spills on Henkels & McCoy, a Pennsylvania firm it hired to replace the meters. Potential problems came to light last month, when a Mount Prospect resident noticed a substance later identified as mercury in the basement.

That changed last Friday, when Nicor discovered that one of its own workers had spilled mercury in a vacant Park Ridge home in 1989. Fisher said it was possible other Nicor employees had spilled mercury as well.

"Obviously, in this situation, mistakes were made. We've recognized that and are taking appropriate steps," he said.

But Henkels was not the only subcontractor hired by Nicor.

"Part of what we're checking now is where the other subcontractors worked," said Nicor spokesman Lee Haines.

# Call gas company's hotline for answers, towns advise

By CASS CLIATT  
Daily Herald Staff Writer

The news that Nicor expects to test up to 200,000 homes for mercury contamination has many Northwest suburban residents wondering if their own homes are in danger.

The news sparked something in the memory of Donald D. Fischer, who recalled workers came to his Rolling Meadows home in the 1960s to move equipment from inside his residence to outside, where there is now a natural gas regulator containing mercury.

By being one of more than 1,600 people to call Nicor's hotline Wednesday, Fischer had his fears allayed, he said.

He learned his gas meter had been moved from inside his Dove Street home, but the regulator had always been outside.

Officials in area towns and local health departments continue to encourage residents to call the hotline, because only homeowners know the history of the utility work done in their homes.

"We haven't really been informed by Nicor of what areas are affected," said Don Wenzel, administrative services coordinator of public works for Rolling Meadows. "If it comes to moving a meter, Nicor doesn't have to get a permit from the city."

"If remodeling projects have taken place or if (the regulators) were moved, the homeowner would

know," Wenzel added.

Fischer was seeking answers from city officials because he noticed Rolling Meadows hadn't been named on any lists as a site screened for mercury, he said.

Levels of mercury contamination have been found in homes in Mount Prospect, Dixon, Lombard, Aurora and Park Ridge since a Mount Prospect family found drops of mercury in its basement in July.

Homes in 14 other towns are being tested throughout the collar counties.

Fischer's call to Nicor put his mind at ease about his own home.

"I had to call twice, because they were busy," Fischer said, "but they said we should be getting a letter in

three to four weeks, telling us that they are going to inspect the homes out here.

They said they don't think there is a problem in Rolling Meadows, but they want to be sure."

Nicor spokesman Lee Haines said the first group of about 15,000 customers will be notified beginning today of mercury screenings in their area.

"We want to notify people as we roll out this larger inspection program," Haines said.

People with questions can continue to call the Nicor hotline at (888) 288-8110, Haines said. More than 10,200 people have called Nicor's hotline since it was set up last week.

By JOHN PATTERSON  
Daily Herald Staff Writer

SPRINGFIELD week, the Sh Buffalo Grove to get a letter

In it, Sullivan Mount Prospect residents of tax breaks, p for seniors, an

But the letterman, a Democrat, that he favors es seniors ge prescriptions. think he and Illinois should ing and mailing

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## Law sayin can't disc

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